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THE BABY'S GRANDMOTHER

“She whom I have praised so,
Yields delight for reason too :
Who could doat on thing so common
As mere outward-handsome woman ?
Such half-beauties only win
Fools, to let affection in.”

—WITHER.

THE
BABY'S GRANDMOTHER

BY

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AUTHOR OF 'TROUBLESOME DAUGHTERS,' 'MR SMITH: A PART
OF HIS LIFE,' 'PAULINE,' 'COUSINS,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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CONTENTS OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. "COME, ADVISE ME, BROTHER," . . .	1
II. "YET YOU USED TO SEEM HAPPY," . . .	20
III. LOTTA,	42
IV. "IT IS NOT HER BEING YOUNG," . . .	59
V. MATILDA LONGS TO TASTE THE DOUBTFUL CUP AGAIN,	85
VI. THE TWO GODFATHERS,	98
VII. "A PRETTY SCRAPE YOU WILL GET INTO," .	125
VIII. A STRANGE EFFECT,	145
IX. ROBERT HAS CAUSE FOR COMPLAINT, . . .	163
X. THE REAL WOUND AND THE APPARENT ONE, .	183
XI. CHALLONER IS IMPATIENT TO BE GONE, .	207
XII. TEDDY'S CONFIDENCES,	225
XIII. WHEWELL ENCROACHES,	241
XIV. TEMPTED BY OPPORTUNITY,	255
XV. HOPING STILL,	268



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THE BABY'S GRANDMOTHER.

CHAPTER I.

“COME, ADVISE ME, BROTHER.”

“But fixed before, and well resolved was she,
As those who ask advice are wont to be.”

—POPE.

BEAUTY, health, ease, and a charming temper, had all combined to hide from an inquisitive world the years that Matilda Wilmot had spent upon it. She looked young—she *was* young. If her skin was as fair, her eyes as bright, and her tresses as luxuriant as they had been twenty years before, not less was her blood as impetuous and her fancy as warm. She still walked, rode, danced, and skated with the

best—was the star of the neighbourhood, the theme of every busy tongue, the envy of every jealous heart; and one abominable fact undid it all—Lady Matilda was, O heavens! a grandmother.

“It is the most ridiculous thing,” said her brother,—and Teddy did not relish ridiculous things in connection with himself and his belongings,—“it is the worst piece of luck that could have happened, that baby coming. Puts us all in the stupidest position. Just as if you and I were not laughed at enough already, the way we go on. Oh, I know, I know well enough. They say we’re a queer lot, and that sort of thing; and it will be worse than ever after this. I say, you know, we must do something; it’s no use staring at each other, and doing nothing to help ourselves. We shall be quizzed all over the place.”

“So we shall.” Matilda looked him in the face without the shadow of a smile. “What are we to do? Come, advise me, brother. Think of something quickly, please.”

“Ah, but that’s it. It’s easy to say, ‘Think of something;’ but what the dickens am I to think of? There is only one way out of the scrape that I see, and that is for you to marry again, and cut the whole concern here.”

“I have been married enough already,” rejoined his sister. “Try again, my dear. Your prescription does not suit the complaint, doctor.”

“Complaint! Well, I am glad to hear you have the sense to complain at least. ’Pon my word, it’s too bad. However, all I can say is, you marry again.”

“And all *I* can say is, I have been married once too often as it is.”

“You women have no logic about you,” burst forth Teddy, impatiently. “Can’t you see, now, that having had one bad husband at the start, it’s long odds but you get a better to go on with? Can’t you see that? Bless me! it’s as plain as a pike-staff. It stands to reason.”

“Very true; to be sure, it stands to reason.

But, my dear brother, 'better' is a vague term. How much 'better,' I should like to know? And then you evidently contemplate my taking a course of husbands, increasing in excellence as I 'go on' with them. Pray, how many will be required?"

"Good gracious! you *are* unreasonable. I never said such a thing. Why, you might hit on the very man for you the very next time."

"I might, certainly."

"And then—there you are."

"True; then—there I am."

"Well, but," proceeded Lady Matilda, with infinite gravity, "supposing, Teddy, — just supposing, for the sake of prudence, you know, —you are always telling me that I am not so prudent as I ought to be, so I intend to make an effort in future,—supposing, then, that I did not?"

"Did not what?"

"Hit on the right man."

"Well, of course—of course," said Teddy,

slightly flustered, as was natural, by the suggestion,—“of course, you know, you must take your chance. I tell you, it’s long odds in your favour, but I can’t say more than that. No man can say more than that. If you marry again——”

“In the abstract. Yes.”

“In the abstract? Yes.” He had not a notion, poor boy, what she meant, for Teddy was simple, very simple, as perhaps has been already gathered. “In the abstract, if you like. You marry again, anyway; and then—there we are.”

“Then—there we are,” repeated Lady Matilda, with the same cheerful enunciation and the same immovable countenance as before; “but, pardon me, dear Ted, explain a little—how?”

“Don’t you see how? I’ll soon show you, then. When you marry, I can come and live with you, and we can live anywhere you choose,—I am sure I don’t care where, so long as it isn’t here——”

("Abstract husband, no vote," *sotto voce* observed Matilda.)

"We could go far enough away," proceeded her brother; "we could now, if we had a little more money—if we had not to hang on to Overton. I can't make out sometimes," with a little puzzled expression,—“I can't quite make out, Matilda, how it is that we haven't more money between us. I thought you had married a rich man.”

"Oh, never mind—never mind that; we know all about that." Lady Matilda spoke rather hastily. "Money is not interesting to either of us, Ted, and I want to hear more about your plan. Tell me what we should do when we had gone away from here, and where to go, and why go at all?"

"As to what we should do! We should do very well. I don't know what you mean by that. And then it's easy enough settling where to go. There are heaps of places, very jolly places, that I could get to know about, once I was on the look-out for them. Places

always crop up once you are on the look-out ; any one will tell you that.”

“ And now, why should we go at all ? ”

“ Why ? ” Teddy opened his eyes, and stared at his sister. “ Why ? Have I not been telling you why all this time ? I do believe you think I like to talk on, for talking’s sake.” (She did, but never let him know as much, listening patiently till the stream had run dry ; but on this occasion Teddy was too sharp, and the subject was too engrossing.) “ Why ? To get quit of it, of course,” he said.

“ Of it ? Of what ? ”

“ That disgusting baby.”

“ Are you speaking of my grandson, sir ? Are you talking of a hapless infant only a few hours old, you unnatural monster ? Shame upon you ! fie upon you, young man ! Pray, Mr Edward Sourface, reserve such epithets in future for other ears ; and be so good, sir, at the same time, to draw off some of the vinegar which is visible in your countenance, and let

me have it presently as a fitting accompaniment to the oil which we shall see exhibited in that of my trusty and well-beloved son-in-law—since one will counteract the other, and thus shall I better be able to digest both. Why, Teddy, what an idiot you are!” said Lady Matilda, dropping all at once her mocking accents, and speaking gently and playfully; “what an ado you make about the simplest and most natural thing in the world! I am married at eighteen, so of course Lotta improves on the idea, and marries *before* she is eighteen. I have a daughter, she has a son: in every way my child has followed the lead given her, and indeed eclipsed her mother from first to last.”

“Fiddlesticks! Eclipsed her mother! *Lotta!*” cried Teddy, with undisguised contempt. “*Lotta!*” he said again, and laughed.

“Oh, Teddy, Teddy, you are not a good uncle. How can you laugh in that unkind way? Be quiet, sir—be quiet, I tell you; I won’t have it. From a grand-uncle, too!

Grand - uncle ! Think of that, Teddy, love. Dear, dear,—’tis really vastly surprising, as the old ladies say.”

“Vastly—something else,” muttered Teddy.

“Mr Grand-uncle,” began the teasing voice.

“Oh, shut up, can’t you ? Grand-uncle !” said Teddy, with such distaste that it seemed he loathed the very term, independently of its adherence to himself—“grand-uncle ! Was there ever such bosh ? It really——”

“What I was going to say was,” pursued his sister, merrily, “that as the baby is a boy, —and youths under twenty do not usually affect matrimony in this country,—I may be permitted to entertain some hopes that I shall not be converted into a great-grandmother with the same delightful celerity with which I have already been turned into a grandmother.”

Then there was a pause, during which the brother looked gloomily out of the window, while the sister found apparently a more agreeable prospect in her own thoughts, for

she smiled once or twice before she spoke again. At last she rose from her seat. "I shall go over this afternoon, of course," she said.

"Over to Endhill?"

"Yes."

"Over to see that baby?"

"Yes."

"What on earth—do you really mean it? Are you really going to waste a whole afternoon slobbering over a wretched baby?"

"Only about ten minutes of it, dear; don't be cross; I shall not ask to see Lotta, as she had better be quiet——"

"——When is she ever anything else?"

"So we can just ride over, come back through the town, see what is going on, and have a fine gallop along the cliffs afterwards."

Now if there was one thing in the world Teddy Lessingham loved, it was to see what was going on in the old county town near which he had been born and bred; and if there was another, it was a gallop along the

high chalky downs when the tide was full, and the sea-wind was blowing the waves right up over the beach beneath. Still he made a demur; he looked at the sky, and looked at Matilda,—“We shall get wet, of course.”

“Of course. Old clothes. It will do us no harm.”

“I don’t mind, I am sure, if you don’t. What time then?” For though the young man had not been formally invited to go, let alone being consulted as to the expedition, it was assumed, indeed it was as much a matter of course that he was to be Matilda’s companion as the horse she rode. To be sure he was. Where could he have gone but where she went? What could he have done that she would not have a part in? He never had a purpose apart from hers: her will was his law; her chariot-wheels his chosen place.

Nor was the widow less ardently attached to her young brother. She, the quickest-witted woman in the neighbourhood, never lost patience with, never wearied of, her poor

foolish Teddy, who, as was pretty well known, was not quite, not *quite* like other people, and yet was so very little wrong, wanting in such a very slight degree, that it was almost a shame to mention it,—and yet, if the truth were told, it was perhaps even more awkward and trying in some ways than if there had been more amiss. For Teddy considered himself to be a very knowing and remarkably wide-awake fellow. On his shoulders, he felt, rested a heavy weight of responsibility, and cares manifold devolved on his far-reaching mind. For instance, who but he kept up the whole social credit of Overton Hall in the eyes of the world? Did he not entertain strangers, remember faces, do the civil to the neighbourhood generally, whereas Overton and Matilda never thought of such things? Overton was “a very good brother, a precious good brother, and he was not saying a word against him;” but without saying a word against him, it is certain that the speaker felt and was scarcely at pains to conceal his sense of his own supe-

riority. Overton, he would complain, had no idea of keeping things up to the mark—had no *nous*, no *go* in him ; whereas Matilda, poor Matilda (here he would wag his head with sombre sagacity)—poor Matilda was such a flighty, here - there - everywhere, happy - go - lucky, devil-may-care sort of creature, that if it were not for *him*,—oh, it was no wonder Teddy had a serious aspect, all things considered.

Perhaps Matilda was at times diverted and at times provoked ; but at any rate she took care that no one else should be either one or the other in her presence. In everything she supported and fortified her brother. He lectured her, and she listened dutifully. He put forth his wisdom, and it was met by gentle raillery or grave assent. His wildest assertions, his most pitiful arguments, were softened, smoothed, and helped tenderly out of the conversation, — so that even those who liked the fair Matilda least—and they were women, we may be sure—even those allowed

that she was wonderfully, extraordinarily "nice" with Teddy.

Now Teddy could be irritating. There were times when he would be sharp, sharp as a needle, and sharp inevitably at the wrong moment and in the wrong way. The thing that it was particularly desirable that he should not see, and should know nothing about, he would perceive by intuition—and that, however absent-minded and dull and stupid he might have seemed but the moment before. There was no evading his penetration, and no putting him off the scent once he struck it: he saw like a lynx, and heard like a Red Indian, when it suited him.

Then perhaps when such smartness was particularly mischievous in its results, and Teddy would meet with the mildest of rebuffs from those whom he had so wantonly maltreated, he would be very highly aggrieved indeed. Perhaps the rebuff might never even come to be spoken, but a something in the

air would show that all was not well, and this was enough ; he was out of favour, and he was bound to show resentment ; nor, when he thus took the bit between his teeth, could all the united efforts of Overton and Matilda dislodge it. He was not to be either cajoled or coerced out of his mood. Silence, obstinate, unyielding, leaden-weighted silence, would be his refuge ; and while the fit lasted, which it might do for days at a time, neither the earl nor his sister had much peace of mind. Vague misgivings would creep into their bosoms and betray their presence by uneasy whispers and glances, if Teddy's whereabouts were unknown for any length of time : if he lingered out of doors after the great bell had sounded from the tower at luncheon-time or dinner-time, one would be at the staircase window, and another looking casually out of the front door. They would watch him disappear across the park, and when once the tall handsome figure was out of sight, and Teddy could have no suspicion that he was being spied upon, one

or other would be pretty sure to follow, and be merely strolling about in the same direction, if by chance they were obliged to let him see he was not alone. He would not address the intruder on his solitude. He would look angrily away, mutter to himself, and pass on. The servants would understand that Mr Edward was in a "temper," and avoid him; his very dog would make no efforts to engage his notice.

But this is Teddy at his worst. These ugly days are few and far between,—thank God they are, or what might they not lead to? They come but seldom, and go as they come, unquestioned, unblamed. Gradually the cloud begins to roll away, a softer look steals back to the face, the lips part in a smile, the whistle to Gruff brings Gruff rampant to his master's side, and it is plain that all is to be right again.

Overton nods to Matilda, and she nods back. Overton addresses Teddy as though nothing had happened, and Matilda takes it for granted

that he will join her in some little jaunt or other, previously arranged and ready to be brought forward,—and they both talk away to him and take his arm, and pat him on the back, just as if he had not persistently avoided their company as much as he could for the last thirty or forty hours, and had not, when compelled to endure it, maintained an unbroken, sullen, affected unconsciousness of their presence. That is past, and he may be approached again. He looks a little anxious, a little ashamed: a vague feeling of having been naughty oppresses the lad as it would a child, and his spirits gratefully rise as he perceives he is not to be punished for his misbehaviour. If Overton were cold to him, or, worse still, were Matilda to quarrel with him, all Teddy's happiness in life would be gone, for these two beings people his world, and in their unfailing forbearance and affection he basks as in sunshine.

“Yet Mr Edward talks sensible enough,” avers the old major-domo of Overton, who has

known Mr Edward from his cradle. "I've seen folks as taken as they could be with Mr Edward, I can tell you; and my lord not being married, nor looking that way, there's many would jump at the young one on the chance. Lord bless you, he ain't far wrong, not by no means! he is just a bit simple and foolish like; but who's to know that that sees him in company?—such a fine well-set-up young gentleman to look at, a-talking here, a-talking there, always quite easy and comfortable, and dressed—there ain't a better-dressed gentleman in London. For one coat of my lord's Mr Edward have half-a-dozen; and as to trousers, Joseph here tells me he wouldn't like to give a guess even at what his trouser bill is. My lord, he pays: bless you, he don't say nothing to nobody, but he just pays and keeps the receipts. He ain't as poor as Mr Edward thinks, d'ye understand? 'Twould never do to let Mr Edward have every suvering *he* wanted, or we should soon be in the workhouse; but he gets his little

bit of money that his father left him, just to make believe, d'ye see? He gets it paid regular down, and he fusses over it, and thinks it's all he have to live upon,—and to be sure he can see well enough 'tis but a trifle,—so that just keeps him down nicely. To hear him sometimes telling folks how poor he is! But he forgets, you know,—he forgets, does Mr Edward. Lor'! you may talk to him by the hour together, and he don't know nothing at the end. Tell him a thing, and he takes it in all right enough; but it just goes through and through his head without stopping—in at the one ear and out at the other, before any good or bad comes of it. If it weren't for Lady Matilda——,” and the old man shook his head.

It was in this light that the Hon. Edward Lessingham was looked upon by the inmates of Overton Hall.

CHAPTER II.

“YET YOU USED TO SEEM HAPPY.”

“A coronet, my lord goes by,
My lady with him in the carriage,—
You’d never guess from that proud eye
It was a miserable marriage.”

—ANON.

AND now we must more formally introduce our readers to Overton Hall itself, and to the three representatives of the Overton family now alone remaining, since they were, one and all, so far from being unremarkable, that in any rank, among any associates, they must still have attracted notice. As it was, as the first people of the place, they were an unfailing source of gossip, conjecture, and comment in a particularly barren and unfruitful neighbourhood. Providence had been kind to the

parish in bestowing on it such a patron as Lord Overton, and such a pair as Teddy and Matilda for his brother and sister. No three people could have done more for the dull out-of-the-way old-world part they lived in, and that involuntarily; for, truth to tell, it was not all the money they gave away, the schemes they organised, the example they set, which was half so much valued among the villagers as their freaks and fancies, their whims and vagaries, their doings and sayings, their goings and comings,—these were the real benefit, the real, actual, positive benefit, which was conferred, and for which gratitude was due.

Overton Hall, far from the busy world—at least as far as it is possible to be in England in these highly strung and terribly communicative days—four miles from a small and sleepy wayside station, in plainer terms, was sunk in a hollow (though Lady Matilda would never allow as much)—was, at any rate, far down the slope of a long low Sussex hillside; and although pleasant enough as a

summer residence, was looked upon by all but its inhabitants as absolutely unendurable after the fall of the leaf. When October had once fairly set in, the park would be a series of swamps, over which faint blue mists hung incessantly; the red walls of the old Elizabethan mansion would be visible for miles on every side when the thin scrubby woodlands around had been stripped of their foliage; and it had been said over and over again that no people but the Overtons themselves, no residents less pertinaciously attached to their native place, would ever have lived on through winter after winter in such a dreary spot.

That they did so, however, from choice, was a priceless boon to those who, from necessity, followed their example. So little of the Overtons went such a long way; they were so rich in resources in themselves, so replete with material for the wits of others to work upon; one was so unlike the other, and all were so unlike the rest of their neighbours,—that the one universal feeling was, that they could

never have been replaced, had any evil chance taken them away. What they did, and what they left undone, was of almost equal interest ; why Lord Overton took a morning instead of an afternoon walk, made talk for half-a-dozen tongues. What carriages went from the Hall to meet such and such a train ? When they returned ? Who were in them ? Was Teddy seeing the guests off when he was met driving down on the following day ; or were they stopping over Sunday ? All of this was food for ardent speculation ; and the erection of new park palings, or a fresh lodge at the edge of the low wood, was not of more vital importance than the health of Matilda's sick parrot, or the consideration as to the length of time her whimsical ladyship had worn her one bonnet in church.

Although all three were thus constantly before their public, it, however, by no means followed that they were on the same footing in the public mind ; and strange to say, the elder brother, the least striking, the least

notable as he was of any, had to him the *pas* given; but then the case stood thus: Lord Overton was one whom no one—except, perhaps, the very very few who had known him closely from boyhood—believed in. He was, at the time our story commences, in the prime of life—that is to say, he was forty years old, and looked his age. He was short, stumpy, plain, and worse than plain, coarse in feature, and marked, though but slightly, with small-pox. He was, in fine, not passively, but aggressively ill-favoured; not insignificant, not one who might have been cast in a mould whence hundreds more of the same could be turned out to order if required, but he was the unfortunate possessor of a face which might have been constructed upon trial, and found so unsatisfactory as to have been never reproduced.

But then he was the Earl of Overton. What signified it to the Earl of Overton how he looked, or of what formation was his nose, or chin, or mouth? What did it matter that he

shambled in his walk, slouched in his chair, and sat inches lower than his sister? What though he had not Teddy's easy grace and swinging step, or the bell-like tones of Matilda's voice? He was the Earl of Overton. These things were, or ought to have been, considerations quite beneath the Earl of Overton. In virtue of the solitary possession birth, he should have been more potent than the Apollo Belvidere, or the sage Æsop. He should not have supposed it possible that he could look amiss, or act amiss, or talk too much or too long.

Nobody could believe that he did think it possible; and thus it was that, as we have said, nobody believed in the man himself.

He was a mystery—a cynic; he was proud as Lucifer; he was mad as a March hare. It was said of him that not all his ancestors for generations back had held themselves so high as he did. He was dubbed a recluse and a monk; while, to carry out the pleasant suggestion, the Hall itself would be termed the

monastery (but if it were one, like unto some in the olden time it must have been, when monks were merrier than they are now). This, however, is an aside between the reader and the writer,—in the eyes of the good folk round the simile was apt. But what puzzled them a little, and set one or two thinking, was this, that after all, though everything that was heard of Lord Overton bespoke him proud, stern, and self-contained—after all, if you met the earl face to face, if he *had* to look at you and *had* to speak to you, his look was wonderfully meek and his voice gentle.

Now Lord Overton thought no more of himself than if he had been a city scavenger. That was the real truth, and in that truth lay the perplexity. People could not understand, would not, indeed, credit for a single second the notion that so great a man could be humble-minded.

And how came it that he was so? Probably after this fashion. His parents had been vain,

selfish, and ambitious; and they could ill brook the idea that their first-born, their heir, the future head of the house, should give no promise of bringing to it either honour or repute. Overton had from infancy been awkward, ugly, and illiterate. There was no hope that he would shine either as a politician, or as a courtier, or as a soldier, or as—in short, anything. Teddy had eclipsed him in beauty, Matilda in intellect, and the latter had been the father's, the former the mother's darling. With neither had he been in the smallest degree of consequence, over neither had he possessed any influence, and they had only noticed his being the eldest as a fresh source of vexation, since he did the position so little credit.

It had all sunk deeply into a nature already reserved, bashful, and backward.

Not all the subsequent fuss about the peer in possession; not all the flattery of time-servers, anxious to worship the risen sun; not even time and reflection, could shake Overton's

conviction that he was a nobody, and would always be a nobody.

It was impossible, Matilda said, to open her eldest brother's eyes. He could never see that he was needed, never suppose that he could be wanted.

For instance, it was intolerably palpable when old Lady Finsbury—the dear old dowager who lived in the very small house along the London Road—when the old lady herself drove to the Hall on purpose to secure the party for a little dinner—such a little dinner as she could give and liked to give,—it was plain that the presence of Overton himself on the occasion was not only desired, but was of first-rate importance. He was more than wanted, he was anxiously, painfully wanted,—but the idea never occurred to him that it could be so. He thought it very kind, uncommonly kind, of Lady Finsbury to ask them all; but three out of one house were quite too many for her little room—(Lady Matilda winced and looked at the speaker,

but he saw nothing),—he should not think, should not really think, of trespassing on her hospitality to such an extent. On the point he was firm as a rock. Teddy was of so much more use than he in society that Teddy must go, of course, and Lady Finsbury would kindly excuse him. Of course Lady Finsbury went away mortified, poor soul. Of course she told the story of her defeat with variations, crescendos, and diminuendos, as it suited her, to half-a-dozen intimates ere the week was out; and of course they one and all agreed that the dear creature had been abominably ill-used, and that Lord Overton must have been a perfect brute to say to her face that she had not a room in her house fit for him to sit in.

Meantime Matilda would be groaning in spirit at home. “Oh, Overton, Overton, when will you learn to understand, when will you ever say the right thing? Can’t you see, oh, can’t you see, you dear blind, blind, blindest of blind beetles, in what a

dreadful state of mind you have sent home that poor harmless unoffending old lady? She had done you no injury, she had come brimming over with goodwill and loving-kindness to us all, and instead of accepting graciously her little overtures, and crowning her with joy and gladness, you dashed her hopes to the ground, and seemed to take pleasure in trampling upon them when they were there."

"Good gracious, Matilda, what do you mean? What have I done?"

"Done—done! 'that which can't be undone,' I can tell you, my dear. And after all, why would you not go? You have no reason for refusing. You had not even manners to put forth the ghost of an excuse——"

"——As to excuse, I told her the truth. I was very much obliged, and I understood perfectly,—she thought she could not ask Teddy and you without me, and so she asked me too,—but she did not want me a bit, and as I did not want to go, I thought it was much the best way to take it on myself to refuse.

She was quite satisfied. Did you not see she stopped asking me at once——"

"Yes, indeed, I did see that."

"Well, what more would you want?"

"Want? Oh, Overton!"—she stopped to laugh and sigh in despair—"who could believe you could be so—well, never mind, you meant it for the best, but you never, never do yourself justice; and how are people to know that it is all because you are so unfortunately, outrageously, insufferably modest? They won't believe it, nobody will believe it; and besides, you do say such things: now you can see this, surely, that Lady Finsbury could not like your reflecting on her little rooms?"

"I did not 'reflect' on them at all. I merely said we were too many for them; I 'reflected' on *us* if I 'reflected' on any one."

"If you thought we were too many, why should not Teddy have stayed at home, or at least have offered to stay at home, and you and I have gone together? That might have been done."

“To be sure it might,—but to be sure, also, I knew better than that. Why, of course,” continued Lord Overton, with a momentary bitterness which showed that although the old wounds of childhood might have been healed, they still woke and smarted at times—“of course, any one would rather have Teddy than me. Don’t you suppose I know that? Teddy ornaments the rooms, and keeps everybody going with his talk, while I am good for nothing. Do you think I have forgotten that he was always sent for to the drawing-room as a boy, while it was never thought desirable that *my* studies should be interrupted? Did he not invariably accompany our mother to town when she went to one gay place and another, and was not I left at home? Who taught *me* to play and sing, or gave me masters for dancing, or sent me abroad to learn languages? I am such an oaf that I can’t enter a room like other people. I can’t speak a tongue but my own. I am not fit for society——”

“You are fit for *any* society. Overton, my dear Overton, don’t talk like that,” said Matilda, springing forward to put her hand on his arm as he was turning to leave the room. “You deceive yourself—indeed, indeed you do,”—her own eyes reflecting the moisture in his. “Teddy, poor Teddy, you know what he is; surely you do not begrudge him advantages which have just made him passable—just enabled him to go through the world without bringing down its ridicule upon his head; surely you see——,” she paused.

“I see, Matilda—I see, I know, I understand; but I cannot help feeling—oh, you know well enough what I feel.”

“And you are so kind to him,” pursued she, with a sudden sob; “yes, you are—you are. No one would be like you to him—the best, the dearest, the——”

“Well, well, never mind; why, it’s all right, of course it’s all right; they meant to do their duty by us both, I suppose; and one ought

not to speak against one's father and mother—specially when they are dead, but——”

“Think what they did for *me*,” said Matilda, in a low voice, but with drier eyes.

Her brother was silent.

“Did they not marry me when I was but a girl, a child?” pursued his sister; “did they not give me to a man more than twice my age, who neither loved me nor feigned to love me, who was incapable of loving any one but himself? who made my life a burden——”

“Yet you used to seem happy.”

“Was I happy? It must have been after a strange fashion then. Why, Overton, you say I used to seem happy. To *seem*? Yes; that is exactly the word. Was it likely I should do anything but ‘seem’? To show the truth, to lay bare my wretchedness for every passer-by to gaze upon? No, indeed. The thing was done, and I had but to keep up the farce as best I could. Well, well,” continued Matilda in a brisker tone, “well, well, those days are past, and we are all very happy

now,—are we not, dear? As to your being jealous of Teddy——”

“I never said I was jealous. How can you think such a thing?”

“As to imagining that Teddy can in any way fill your shoes, or take the place of Lord Overton in the sight of a hostess——”

“——Ay, that’s it; I can follow you there. Possibly Lord Overton might be welcome, but I—I—myself——”

“——But you—you—yourself, being as you are, Lord Overton, cannot disassociate your person from your title, your body from—let me see what; at any rate you will not refuse the next invitation, and send home the next fair dame who brings it, dying with chagrin?”

Perhaps she would after such a discussion endeavour still further to explain matters, but the end of any such attempts would be almost always the same—a sort of storm of admiration and vexation on her part, and partial and temporary enlightenment on his.

Such a gleam would soon die out. He

would go to the next party as he had been bid, would go internally quaking and outwardly cold and frigid, and although endeavouring to do his best, would somehow contrive to do it with the very worst effect possible. He would not stand on the hearth-rug; he would not play the earl; the most unostentatious back seat would infallibly be his resort, and the nearest person to him—quite possibly the humblest individual there—had such conversation as he possessed. It was not much: he would look wistfully and enviously at his younger brother, who, with artless complacency, and in the very best of spirits, was prattling away first to one and then to another; who was moving about from place to place as anything caught his eye or engaged his attention; who, during the dinner which followed, would be beset on every side by fair ones anxious for his attention, for attention which he seemed willing and able to distribute to each and all impartially,—and he would wonder how Teddy did it. No such brilliant effusions came from

him, no such happy sallies set the table laughing. It was hard on his companion, Lord Overton would consider; and graver and graver would grow his voice, and longer and longer his face, as the hours wore on. When all was over he would heave a sigh of relief, but even the relief was tempered by apprehension of a probable lecture on the way home; and thus it was scarcely to be wondered at that society liked the unfortunate nobleman little better than he liked society, and that although some—the charitable—merely called him stiff and stately, the greater part of his acquaintance characterised him as eaten up with pride.

And what of Matilda, the widow, the mother, and now the grandmother?

She was, as has been already said, a lovely woman; full of animal life; warm-blooded, high-spirited, and impetuous; a passionate partisan or an unsparing adversary; one who loved or hated with equal warmth; generous to a fault, or sarcastic to acrimony. At the

age of thirty-seven—for she was three years younger than Overton—she still possessed in a redundant share the freshness, energy, and spring of youth—perhaps also some of its incompleteness. There was still promise to be fulfilled, still material for experience to work upon; but this only added, as it seemed, to the charms of one already so charming—one who was too charming to be perfect. Her voice was soft, yet rich; never raised above an even medium note; yet so clear was the enunciation, and so resonant the tone, that wherever the sound of it was carried, words and meaning could be discerned also.

In figure she was tall, and though not more fully formed than became her age, yet giving indications that, in after life, she might become stout rather than thin.

But who shall describe the lustre of her large dark eye, by turns soft, subtle, searching, or sparkling, brimming, and mischievous? Who could forget the exquisite pose of her head, the broad low brow, the play of her

lips, the curve of her chin, the rounded throat, the falling shoulder? No wonder that she was adored. No wonder that every man who had once seen, looked twice, thrice, whenever and wherever he could, at Lady Matilda.

How it came to pass that, with lovers in plenty, she had never contracted a second union, even Matilda herself would hardly have been able to explain. She neither was, nor had ever affected to be, a broken-hearted woman, one who had played out her part in a troublesome world, and had fain have no more ado with it: so far indeed from this being the case, people did say that, having been married off as fast as possible by parents who were solely anxious to get the skittish lass off their hands, the poor thing had been mercifully deprived of a husband whom no one could tolerate, and that probably the happiest day of her life had been that which saw her, all beclouded from head to foot in trappings of woe, brought back a widow to the home of her childhood. Over that home the kind

Overton now reigned, and over him Matilda herself meant to reign. She meant it, and she did it. Never had sister found a warmer welcome, and never had one been more needed or appreciated. She had flown at her brothers' necks, kissed, hugged, wept over them with—we hardly like to confess what kind of tears, but perhaps the two may have guessed,—at any rate, in their satisfaction, and in her own, each felt that, with Matilda back again, a new life had begun. Every want was supplied, every void filled up. Soon there began to be heard a firm light tread up and down the broad staircase; a cheerful woman's voice would issue forth through open doorways; and by-and-by a jest and a laugh would peep slyly out when Matilda's lips were open, as though half afraid to make known their presence, and yet unable to hide away longer. Sounds of music echoed from distant chambers; flowers, dewy and fragrant, met the eye about the rooms; there were parcels on the hall-table; there was a riding-whip here, and a pair of

gloves there ; and a neat little coat would be found hung up among the men's coats on the stand, and a sweet little hat would perch alongside the brothers' hats upon the pegs ; and all this meant—Matilda. .

Fresh wheel-marks down the avenue showed that Matilda was out driving ; the boat-house key lost, told that she had been out boating ; the hothouse doors left ajar, betrayed that she had been eating the grapes.

Everywhere was Matilda felt, and to everything she had a right ; and thus intrenched in comfort, authority, and contentment, sure it would have been a bold adventurer indeed who would have thought of storming such a citadel.

CHAPTER III.

LOTTA.

"She speaks, behaves, and acts, just as she ought—
But never, never reached one generous thought."
—POPE.

WE must not, however, forget that up to within a very few months of the time our story opens, there had been another inmate of Overton Hall, and indeed an inmate who had no mean idea of her own importance. This was the little girl called Lotta, who, with large round eyes and demure step, accompanied her mother on Lady Matilda's return to the Hall. Now it must be confessed that the one very very slight thorn in the sides of the three chiefly concerned in this restoration was connected with the little Charlotte — or

Lotta : they could not, any of them, be quite as fond of Matilda's child as they could have wished to be. It would have been natural for her to have been the centre of attraction to one and all—for the bereaved parent to have been absolutely devoted to her darling, and for the uncles to have found an unfailing source of interest and amusement in one who was at the endearing age of six, when childhood is especially bewitching, and when the second teeth have not yet begun to come. The whole household might have been provided with an object in Lotta. In taking care of her, watching over her, delighting her little heart with trifles, admiring the dawning of her intelligence, and recounting her sayings, an unflagging source of conversation and study might have been discovered : and, indeed, wiseacres shook their heads, and predicted that a nicely spoilt young lady Miss Charlotte Wilmot would grow up to be, in such an atmosphere, and with such surroundings.

They were mistaken. Lotta was not spoilt

after the fashion they thought of,—and this from no severe exercise of self-restraint on the part of Lady Matilda and her brothers, but simply because they were not so tempted. Nothing, indeed, made the widow more indignant than a hint that such was the case ; hard and long she strove against the fact, against nature, against everything that favoured the distressing conviction, but she was overpowered at last, and almost allowed it to herself in her disappointment. She could not, try as she might, turn Charlotte into an engaging child : she petted her, played with her, romped with her ; and Charlotte accepted it all without hesitation, but without originating either a caress or a frolic in return. What was wrong ? No one seemed to know. From infancy the little girl had been a compound of virtues, and it was said of her that a less troublesome charge no nurse had ever possessed. At the age of eight she cut and stitched dolls' frocks without assistance, set herself her own tasks if her governess were unwell or absent, gave

directions as to when tucks were to be let down or breadths let out in her frocks, and refrained — on principle — from tasting unknown puddings at table. What was there left for mother, or uncles, to do?

“She puts me to shame, I know,” cried Lady Matilda, valiantly; “she thinks of things in a way I never could, and quite wonderful in a child of her age. I don’t know where I should be without Lotta, I am so forgetful about what has to be done, and she reminds me of it just at the right time and in the right place. Do you know, she always asks nurse for her medicine” — Lotta being at the time ill with measles. “Nurse says there is no need for *her* to think about it, for as sure as the finger of the clock points to the hour, Lotta asks for her dose. Is it not nice, and — and thoughtful of the poor child?” And as she spoke thus bravely, almost fiercely, in defence of her offspring, no one would venture to differ from a word she said; indeed they would hastily and nervously

agree, find more to say, discriminate between the little phenomenon and others, valorously finding a verdict in Lotta's favour, and watch the very tips of every syllable they uttered, lest anything should escape to rouse suspicion on the part of the parent, thus herself upon the watch against herself.

But how came Lotta to be a child of Lady Matilda—of the gay, careless, jocund Matilda? How came such a creature of habit and order to be associated with such a very spirit of heedlessness and improvidence? How grew such a methodical imp in such a casual soil? How, in short, came the dull, worthy, excellent, and most unattractive daughter, to be born of the brilliant, arch, incorrigible mother? A mystery of mysteries it was.

Lady Matilda did not like to have remarks made upon the subject. She was fond of Charlotte, maternally,—that is to say, Charlotte was her child, her only child, the little one whom she had watched from infancy, and who was to be her friend and companion in

after life. She had rejoiced in being young for Charlotte's sake. Charlotte should have no sober-minded, middle-aged, far-away parent, who would smile benignantly on her games and toys, or listen condescendingly to her tales of lovers and suitors, having neither part nor lot in such matters, and looking down in wisdom from a height above them. Such mothers were all very well; but she would be on a level with her child, hand and glove in all that went on, the maiden's chosen companion and intimate.

And then, behold, Lotta had needed no such companion; had felt herself sufficient for herself from earliest days; had, if the truth were told, an idea as she waxed older, that she was her mother's superior in sense and sagacity, forethought and prudence. What was to be done, this being the case? A wet day would come, and Lady Matilda, bored to death with a long afternoon in the house, would cheerfully propose—making Lotta the pretext—a game of battledore and shuttlecock

in the gallery. Oh yes, Lotta would play if mamma wished it; but it would surely tire mamma, and for herself she would prefer going on with what she was doing. She was quite happy; she was preparing her lessons for the next day; she did not need any play, thank you. After such a snub, Matilda and Teddy would look at the child—Matilda with a perplexed curious look, Teddy with a grin—and then they would go off and play with each other, while not even the sounds of mirth and the regular monotonous tap-tap of the shuttlecock would bring the diligent and virtuous piece of industry from her self-set task.

“She might have been born an old woman,” Matilda would mutter to herself; but she would take very good care not to let what had passed elicit a comment from Teddy. While Lotta was very young, and before it became absolutely certain what Lotta would turn out, he knew that no animadversions on his niece would be permitted, and that his sister, sore because of her own disappointment,

would not stand so much as an insinuation from others. It was when the little girl was most imposing and didactic, was least endurable, in other terms, that Lady Matilda's tongue ran fastest in her favour. What would her uncles have? They need not expect every child to be like other children, as if they were a pack of sheep. Lotta was all that any one could desire in the way of goodness and gentleness: and as for her little practical head, you might trust her with a whole list of articles to buy, and shops to go to, and she would not only forget nothing, but would bring her little account afterwards and make it balance to a farthing. "Which is more than I ever could do," the poor lady would add in conclusion.

But as Charlotte grew up there was less and less in common between her and her mother.

The latter could not hide from herself, as years went on, how limited in reality were her daughter's powers, and how commonplace her mind. The very governess learned to

shrug her shoulders. "Yes, Miss Charlotte was not what you could call *bright*, not *quick*. She was a very good girl, very industrious, very diligent, but she had not the — the ability. No; she had no decided turn for anything. For languages, certainly not; for history, geography, grammar, pretty well; but music, drawing, poetry" — she would shake her head.

In short, Charlotte was a dullard, who never opened a book if she could help it, who neither knew nor cared to know what was in the heavens above or in the earth beneath, who seldom put a question, who never created an idea, and who was far more satisfied with her ignorance than the wisest philosopher with his knowledge. At seventeen Lady Matilda, who had indeed, as we know, no cause to advocate matrimony, was still fain to acknowledge to herself that when the young lady had finished with lessons there would be nothing for it but to marry her.

“Provided she gets a poor man she may do very well,” reflected the unworldly mother; “a rich one would leave her far too little to think about; and as she has something of her own, she can never be really at a loss. Grant her a poor man—a moderately poor man—and she will find the most delightful occupation in economising, saving, looking after every bit and scrap, worrying her servants, and reducing everything she has in hand to system. She will do her own marketing, and turn her own gowns. She will have a bunch of keys as big as a bottle. Yes, yes; that must be it. Lotta must marry, and marry soon, or—well, there is no use denying it, she will drive us all out of our senses.”

“Since Miss Grove has deserted us”—for the wily Miss Grove, oppressed by the staid solemnity of her one pupil, had flown to a livelier schoolroom, after having first assured Lady Matilda, with a mixture of artfulness and ingenuity, that it was of no use her staying on, as Miss Wilmot would never

learn more than she knew already—"since Lotta has been her own mistress, she has become quite dreadful," owned poor Matilda to herself. "She prosed to Overton like a woman of fifty, and seems to think that her mission in life is to keep us all in order. I am sure I really do not know what will be the end of it, if some charitable person does not take pity upon us, and appear to the rescue."

And then, as if by magic, who should appear before the astonished eyes of the fair conjuror but the very charitable person she sought, as though raised by her spells? It was too much. She was almost overpowered by her good luck. Could it be—could it really be? Was it possible, not to say actually the case, that here was Mr Robert Hanwell, the unexceptionable, not too rich, not too clever, not too exacting son and heir of old John Hanwell at the other end of the county, coming forward as a suitor for the hand of the youthful and charming and sadly perplexing Miss Wilmot?

Miss Wilmot's mamma clapped her hands when there was no one by to see her.

Then she was vexed with herself, and the tears came into her eyes as she saw what she had done. Was that the way to treat an event so serious? Was that the spirit wherein she should have received the news that her daughter's happiness was, humanly speaking, secured for life? She ought to have known better. Well did she know whence came this good thing, and who had taken thought of the widow and the fatherless, and a softer light shone in her eye, and the lip quivered a little, as associations and memory awoke, as they do awake at such times. Lotta would be happy in her husband, it appeared. Mr Hanwell was known to them all by repute, and repute spoke him a good man, come of a good stock. He was apparently much enamoured of Lotta; he had met her at a country house, whither Charlotte had been packed off in order to give the household at Overton a moment's breathing-space after her emancipation, and the

sedate, well - conducted, and fairly comely young miss had apparently found favour in the eyes of one person from the very beginning of their acquaintance. Lotta had been glad enough to go, glad to leave Overton, where, although she knew not why, she herself had felt uncomfortable, and where, just before, Teddy had succeeded in rousing up the party, if he had not improved matters, by sulking for a week on end. Lotta had gone off in good spirits, well pleased and well dressed—Lady Matilda had taken care of the last—and the consequence was, she had been caught at her best. They had little expected such a result; they had merely felt that Mademoiselle must betake herself elsewhere for a season, must give them a brief release from her sense and supervision; therefore the delight of all may be imagined, and even Lady Matilda's childish expression of it pardoned, when one fine morning who should appear but Mr Robert Hanwell, big with purposes concerning her.

He met with no opposition ; to demur was not to be thought of. The earl and his sister had indeed much ado to conceal their indecent glee at the prospect of getting rid in a manner at once so unexpected and so delightful of an incubus whose weight had already begun to press heavily on their shoulders ; and it was only by rigidly composing their countenances that they could restrain an outbreak and overflow of smiles, and by steadfastly fixing their eyes upon the ground that they could keep them from reciprocally congratulating each other.

With some trepidation Mr Hanwell made his offer. He was, he stated, not a wealthy man, but his father could do something for him ; he was the eldest son, and the estate was unencumbered ; his father could give him seven or eight hundred a-year ; he had no profession, having—hum—haw—dabbled in law a little, but not been exactly called to the bar—at least—well, it did not signify, it would not have suited him,—and all he meant was

that, having thus no tie to any place — no necessity for being here or there—he would be able to settle down anywhere; he should have no objection — indeed, would be very glad—to be in the neighbourhood of Overton, as no doubt Lady Matilda would wish,” — Lady Matilda gravely bent her head, — “he would do anything, in short, in that way, or in any way, for he felt very much what a — that — a — that he was asking a great deal, that he was seeking to deprive a mother of her only child,” — Lady Matilda bowed again, — “but indeed,” concluded the aspirant with a flourish — “indeed, I would endeavour to do my best to be worthy of the position I aspire to.” The last sentence with a glance towards Lord Overton, who was standing harmlessly by, and who had no idea whatever that the said position referred in any way to him.

Mr Hanwell thus got through the whole of the speech he had previously prepared, without interruption from either, and probably also without in the least discovering then or

thereafter that there had been no occasion for saying anything half so fine.

Overton merely observed that Charlotte was a good girl, and would make him a good wife.

Lady Matilda endeavoured to go a step further, and floundered about between truth and falsehood for several minutes, before she was able to seek refuge in complimenting alternately the young man's parents and himself. "She knew," she vowed, "all about the Hanwells, everybody must know *about* the Hanwells if they did no more, and she should be only too happy to be connected with them, to have her daughter enter so—so—" for the life of her she could not think of any other word than "respectable," and as that would hardly have done to say, she was fain to do without an attribute, and finish off rather humbly with "such a family as the Hanwells."

It was at this juncture that the door flew open, and Teddy,—who had not been present, but who had managed nevertheless to learn, as he usually did, by means best known to him-

self, all that was going on,—Teddy now burst in with a face like a sunbeam, shook the visitor's hand for full two minutes, stared him in the face, and wound up with a laugh which we are bound to confess was suspiciously silly.

All, however, was taken in good part.

Mr Hanwell was satisfied, more than satisfied, with his reception; and Lady Matilda devoted herself for the remainder of his stay towards keeping up the degree of complacency which had been already excited. In private, as we know, she clapped her hands. Lotta married and provided for, settled in a comfortable home, with a good kind husband of her own choosing, within easy reach of Overton, yet not *too* near—not so near as to necessitate daily intercourse—oh, with her whole heart of hearts she blessed Robert Hanwell.

The wedding took place, and we know what the next event was.

CHAPTER IV.

“IT IS NOT HER BEING YOUNG.”

“Amoret, my lovely foe,
Tell me where thy strength doth lie,
Where the power that charms us so,
In thy soul, or in thine eye?”

—WALLER.

ALL this was very delightful, but it must be confessed that entirely content as Lady Matilda was with her son-in-law *as* her son-in-law, in no other light could she have endured him.

He made Charlotte happy. Very well. That was all he had engaged to do, and in thus fulfilling his part of the marriage-contract he was an undeniable success. As a husband he was a pattern, a model, faultless and flawless; as a creditable connection, even as an

eligible match, he might very well pose for want of a better; as a neighbour, he did tolerably; but as a man, weighed in the balances, there was no concealing that he was very light weight indeed. The first blush of acquaintanceship had barely worn off,—he had hardly begun to be at home in the circle, and to assume a right to the seat by Lotta in the drawing-room and at the dinner-table,—ere it was seen and felt that he was eminently fit for her companionship, and pre-eminently unfit for that of any other member of the family.

He was not amusing, and he could not be amused. He was dull, and he liked being dull. Few things interested him, and nothing entertained him. In short, Lotta had fallen on her feet by thus obtaining her own counterpart in a consequential prig, who thought very little and talked a great deal, whose ideas seldom passed beyond the very narrow range of matters connected with himself or those belonging to him, who was never at a loss for material wherewith to enhance his own conse-

quence, and who could not even, according to Lady Matilda, say “Good-bye” or “How d’ye do?” like other people.

The thing that was correct and proper to be done Robert would do; and yet how delightful it would often have been could he have been dissuaded from doing it. One may be very much in the right, and yet it would be better to be in the wrong.

For instance, Lady Matilda hated ceremony, and ceremony was the very marrow of Robert’s bones, the very breath of his nostrils; and what was the upshot? We will not say that she grew to hate the formal young man because of his formality; but it is certain that sometimes when she associated the two in her own mind, it was not clear to her which she for the time least affected. Robert meant well certainly; and she was ready, upon reflection, to allow that it was his place to treat her with a certain amount of deference, but still——. She could not rattle over in the dogcart to Endhill, but she must accept his arm out to

her "carriage" when she left, or, worse still, endure his escort for all the long four miles home, did she choose to return on foot. Nothing that she could do or say would deter him from a proceeding often really inconvenient to himself and infinitely distasteful to her, since he had made up his mind that he understood the etiquette on such points, and that even in the teeth of Lady Matilda's threats and entreaties, he would not fail in his duty. In vain she predicted rain, wind, snow, anything and everything that the elements could do, to save herself the infliction—she would have to give in and be taken home in state at last. She could not run in to see Lotta for five minutes, meaning no stiff call, but merely to fly out again as soon as her errand or inquiry was made,—she could not do this, but the long-necked, long-backed figure of Lotta's husband would stalk forth from somewhere about, and be all readiness to proceed by her side presently. Her direction was his; her time, his. She could not struggle with any success against

attentions so becoming and suitable, and there was not even a window through which she could escape unseen.

Sometimes she had an unexpected ally, when Lotta would put in a fond remonstrance. “Dear Robert, you do not need; I am sure mamma would not wish it when you have a cold already.” But the look given in return was meant to convince the speaker that dear Robert knew better what dear Robert should do than all the mammas in Christendom. He had not intruded into the drawing-room; he could quite understand that he might not be wanted there, that mother and daughter might occasionally prefer to meet without the presence of the proverbially unwelcome third, but the rest must be left to him; and this was one way in which the new member of the family could show himself both dull and dogged.

Again, when the young couple had to be invited over to the Hall, as was pretty often felt to be necessary—it was not precisely a

pleasure, though no one said aloud as much—surely Robert might very well have declined for both when obliged to excuse one. *He* wrote the answer—he might have done it easily, had he seen fit. No offence would have been taken had he, in the roundest terms, asserted his inclination for his own fireside and his dear Charlotte's company, when Charlotte herself was unable to take the long drive and sit out the long dinner—and so he was assured. The truth was, that on the first occasion of a note being sent over when the young wife was known to be ailing, it had been comfortably predicted by Matilda that no acceptance need be apprehended from Robert, since he, who was so very particular on all such matters, would, were Charlotte to decline, infallibly think it only decorous to remain behind also.

Unfortunately Robert's decorum took another turn. He allowed that it was a pity that it should so have happened, and Lotta was extremely sorry to have to give up so

pleasant a prospect, but for himself, he should be most happy to come; he would not have gone anywhere else *en garçon*, but going to Overton was quite another thing; and Lotta begged him to say from her, that she would have been quite vexed had he refused her people on her account. A friend had been invited to keep her company at home, and he had no doubt she would do very well, and be quite able for one evening to amuse herself.

“And three sides of a sheet about it!” cried the ungrateful Matilda, at the close. She could have better liked a worse man, and that was the honest truth about Robert.

Nor was Mr Hanwell in his way more enamoured of his mother-in-law, on nearer acquaintance, than Lady Matilda was with him.

In some inexplicable fashion he was agrieved by her beauty and intelligence, her ready wit and roguish eye; she was too happy, too merry, too—too—he could not exactly say what,—but there was a something incongruous between the lady and her

position, which, in the sight of a young man who, with every fibre of his body and soul worshipped the god of propriety, was hardly to be borne with temper. Naturally he could not think of Matilda as Matilda. She was the late Mr Wilmot's widow, Lotta's mother, and his own mother-in-law,—and it must be said for him, that such a mother-in-law was undoubtedly rather a queer sort of appendage to any man, let alone that Robert was himself thirty-three years of age, and quite willing to own to it; that he had settled down into matrimony with a hearty goodwill; that he filled his waistcoat, changed his socks whenever the roads were wet, preferred a dogcart to a saddle, and dinners to dances.

On his marriage he had voluntarily surrendered whatever of youth he might once have possessed; he no longer cared to be called or thought of as a young man; and pray what did Lady Matilda mean by looking years his junior, and disdaining his hand over the fences?

Lotta had not half so springy a step as her mother. It was childish to be always joking, as Lady Matilda was. And precious little advice or help had Lotta's parent to give when it came to talking about sensible things, he could testify to that. On first taking up house, of course he had expected that Lady Matilda's opinion would have been all in all with her daughter, and that she would have been Lotta's stand-by amidst the inevitable difficulties and troubles of settling in; but he had soon found his mistake. Every mortal thing had Lotta arranged for herself; all the furniture she had chosen; she had hired her own servants and engaged her own tradespeople,—while Lady Matilda had only looked in to listen, and wonder, and smile. He liked Lady Matilda—at least he thought he did; but he wished, oh how he wished, that she stood in any other relation to himself than the one in which she did.

She was to him a provocation extraordinary. Almost every time the two came in

contact, she, to use her own expression, fell foul of him, and that meant that he longed to speak for once openly, and conjure her to take more heed to herself, to take more care of what she said and did, to be more dignified, more reticent, more Lotta-like. Having been much of an authority under his paternal roof, and having laid down the law to half-a-dozen submissive sisters at a time, Robert could ill brook the thralldom now imposed by circumstances on his tongue, or refrain from lecturing the young madam when she did amiss.

Lotta, his dear discreet Lotta, never, or at least hardly ever, needed an admonishing word; but to have straitly rebuked Lotta's mother, had Lady Matilda been any one else, would have been a delight for which his very soul thirsted.

And the wilful creature saw this, and took pains to make his burden heavier than he could bear. With the keenest relish she marked the remonstrance that was struggling to escape lips which resolutely forced it back;

with twinkling eye she kept watch upon the uneasy frown, the restive twitch, the just uttered and hastily recalled syllable,—and then with the sweetest naughtiest audacity that was ever seen, she would add such a touch as would send Robert to the right-about in a trice, fleeing from a temptation which might have proved too much for him.

He never did transgress. That is to say, he never had transgressed up to the time our story opens ; but whether after events did not overpower even his resolution remains to be seen.

As it was, he only found the situation very, abominably awkward.

“It’s not her being young and that,” he would aver. “It’s not her being only thirty-seven, by any means. Thirty-seven is a very good age, a very good age indeed,—if Lady Matilda would only think so, and would only show that she thinks so. Thirty-seven ; bless me ! Thirty-seven. Why there are plenty of ladies are quite *passée* by thirty or

thirty-five; and the married ones—and *she's* a married one, mind you—well, you don't think of them as young ladies, not as *young* ladies at all. They are getting on, at any rate; they are full-grown women; they think sensibly, and talk sensibly, about their children, and servants, and domestic affairs—these are the things that ought to interest women of Lady Matilda's time of life. There's Charlotte now, Charlotte not nineteen yet,—'pon my word, if you saw her and her mother together,—at least I mean"—rather hastily, "if you *heard* them together, you would take Charlotte for the older of the two. You would indeed. Thirty-seven! I declare when I am thirty-seven I shan't want to be running the risk of breaking my neck over all the worst fences in the county, or twirling about by moonlight on the ice, as Lady Matilda did last winter. Poor Charlotte never got her skates on, but there was her mother out every evening, and she and Teddy had all the people round let into the park, and such goings

on. Anybody might go that liked,—it was not at all the thing to do. And that was Lady Matilda to the life. She neither knows nor cares what’s expected of her; she just does as she pleases, and listens to nobody. You never catch her of an afternoon sitting properly in her drawing-room, or driving in her carriage; she is either singing like mad out in the hall, or larking about all over the place with Teddy. I wish, upon my word, I wish any one could make her listen to reason,—but that, no one ever does. She has no more notion of what is befitting her position and dignity than a chambermaid. She makes fun of Lotta—I tell you she does. She would make fun of me too if she dared, but I can take care of myself. We shan’t quarrel, but I have no idea of letting myself be looked down upon by any one. Well,” after a pause, “well, there’s one comfort. Lady Matilda can’t have the face to sport youth any longer once she’s a grandmother.”

The above reflection added yet one more

drop to the fulness of his cup of complacency when Lotta's boy was born, and when, on the same afternoon, he stood dangling his watch and seals on the cottage doorstep awaiting the expected visitors from the Hall.

He had half hoped that Overton might come himself; but Overton, as usual, quite unconscious that anything of the sort was expected of him, had walked off in another direction, and had not even sent so much as a message. There were the other two, however, large as life; Lady Matilda gaily waving her hand as they cantered up the drive—Teddy, with less alacrity, shaking his riding-whip.

There they were, calling out congratulations ere they reached the doorstep.

"So glad — so pleased — welcome news," began the young grandmother——

"Hush—hush—hush," cried Robert, hastily.

"What's the matter? Nothing wrong?" The speaker's note changed on the instant. "Nothing wrong, Robert?"

"Nothing in the least wrong. Oh dear no,

far from it,—but we must be careful all the same. The sound of your voice——” looking up at the windows.

“Why, Lotta’s room is round the corner; she can’t possibly hear,” said Lady Matilda, rather shortly. “You gave me a fright with your ‘hush—hush—hush.’ I was merely going to wish you joy.”

“Many thanks. Allow me,” Mr Hanwell cut short the discussion by assisting her to alight, resenting in his heart the very light touch of her fingers as she did so, but nevertheless preceding with every courtesy his visitors to the drawing-room. “William, take the horses round, and go the back way—not under your mistress’s window. Will you come in, too?” to Teddy, who was ruefully following. “I don’t know if you can see baby, but I will inquire.”

“Oh, I say, don’t.”

“Being in the dressing-room, it may not be convenient.”

“Of course not. I’ll go in here.”

“And wait? Yes, if you kindly will.” Robert nodded approbation. “Lady Matilda can go up-stairs at once—at least, I think she can. I fancy this is not a debarred hour—but though the nurse informed me all about the hours herself, I foolishly forgot to notice if it was from two to four, or from two to half-past four.”

“If what was?”

“The afternoon sleep; if the rooms were to be closed for the afternoon sleep, you know. Of course *you* know all about such arrangements,” Robert had a touch of malicious pleasure in the remark, for it was one of his favourite grievances that Lady Matilda never did seem to know about such things—never appeared in any way to have assimilated with matrimony and motherhood. “The afternoon sleep was to be for two hours or two hours and a half, and during that time no visitors were to be admitted, and of course I undertook that the rule should be carried out,” he continued, as they ascended the staircase.

“Now, this way please” (as though she had never been in the house before), “this way, and take care of the two steps down. This is the door, Lady Matilda.” (Lady Matilda took him off to the life afterwards.) “This curtain is my contrivance, and I think you will approve it. The draught got in under the door, and the nurse—her name is Mrs Burrble—she complained of it, so I set my wits to work. Now then, allow me” (of all his phrases, she disliked that “allow me” most)—“allow me, I can let you pass under perfectly.” Tap, tap, at the door. “Nurse,” said Robert, in his most portentous whisper, “Mrs Burrble. May we come in?”

Lady Matilda laughed outright. She ought not to have done it. She might have been caught in the act either by the nurse or the gentleman, or both, and it would have been no excuse in their eyes that she really could not help herself. She ought to have helped herself, and it was only by the skin of her teeth that she escaped, since there was scarcely a moment

between the tap at the door and the appearance of the portly nurse curtseying behind it. But fate was kind, and Mrs Nurse was intent upon herself. It was not for some seconds that she looked at her lady visitor, and then—but we must tell what she had been doing. She had heard voices and steps outside the door, and divining as by instinct who the new-comer was, had utilised the pause which Mr Hanwell made to explain his contrivance of the curtain, to whisk around the infant the shawl which grandmamma had sent. She now lifted her eyes as she displayed her charge with all the satisfaction of having been so sharp. She lifted her eyes and beheld grandmamma herself.

Grandmamma it was and must be. There was no mistaking the distinct enunciation, “Lady Matilda has come to see the baby, nurse,” but—grandmamma!

Mrs Burrble had heard indeed rumours of Lady Matilda’s youth and beauty, and she had figured to herself a comely dame, fresh-

coloured and well busked, rustling in with a train sweeping the carpet yards behind her ; one who would fall into raptures over the darling boy, finding likenesses all round in every feature, and who would forthwith enter into close and confidential alliance with herself. She had meant to be very close and confidential with my lady, and to take even hints and advice in good part, if need be, since her ladyship would be sure to be good for a gold or silver bowl at the christening, and as likely as not, if she played her cards well, for a handsome silk gown for nurse herself.

A grandmamma was always a grandmamma, and though grandmammass in the house, “passing in and out and making no end of a work,” Mrs Burrble did not “hold with,” a grandmamma four miles off, who would be content like a sensible lady to stop away till she was sent for, and would then come at just the right and proper hour (by sheer good hap Lady Matilda had hit upon it)—such a grandmamma was “a paragraine ;” and in-

spired by the above reflection, the worthy dame dropped her most respectful curtsy as the door opened, and raised her modest and expectant eyes to behold—Lady Matilda.

It was well she was accustomed to babies,—she nearly dropped the one she held in her amazement. It was well she was not spoken to, for she could not have answered. So mute was her bewildered stare, so nervous, so puzzled, so uncertain and confounded and unlike itself her manner, that Robert, who interpreted look, pause, and expression exactly aright, was annoyed and put out of countenance. He felt afresh that justice had not been done him in the matter of his mother-in-law, when here was this woman even, a stranger, a dependant, so aghast at the apparition before her as to be unable to conceal her feelings.

In the dusky light of the October afternoon, Lady Matilda's lithe figure, graceful in every motion, scarce showed that it was a trifle more full and rounded than it had been a dozen years before, her cheeks were bright with ex-

ercise and excitement, and her sparkling eyes, her quick step forward, her eager “Where is he?” all so unlike what should have been, what ought to have been,—gracious heavens, it was too much for any man’s patience! Oh, why had he not been blessed with a connection more to the purpose? What had that radiant form, whose very presence seemed to bring in a glow of life, a breath of the fresh outer air into the little dark room, what had she to do with shaded windows, and silence, and—and baby-clothes?

Solemn and deferential as was the deportment of Lady Matilda’s son-in-law at all times, it exceeded on this occasion what it had ever been before, since in the face of every adverse circumstance, rising above the perplexity and incongruity of his position and hers, Robert resolved to show that whatever might be Matilda’s shortcomings, however young and gay and inconsequent she might show herself, he, at least, knew his place. “My dear Teddy, he nearly killed me,” averred Teddy’s sister

afterwards. "I suppose he saw the joke; and the more he saw it, the less he liked it. The poor nurse, I pitied her: she must have had a severe time of it, rather. There were we two, —Robert hopping about all over the cradle to get out of my way——"

——"All over the cradle! How you do talk!"

"And I not knowing on which arm to take the baby!"

"Well, you ought to have known, I suppose."

"I suppose I ought, but the fact remains that I did not, or, at any rate, that I had forgotten; and so what did I do but commit the heinous offence of taking it on the wrong arm! You should have seen Mrs Gamp's face."

"Mrs Gamp?" said Teddy, bewildered.

"To be sure, yes. Her name is Burrble. How stupid of me to say Gamp! Teddy, see you remember that her name is Burrble, and never, never call her anything else. Mind that, Teddy. People are very particular about

their names,” said Matilda, anxiously. “And then I expect you will be godfather,” she ran on, glibly changing the current of Teddy’s thoughts. “I am sure Robert will ask you.”

“No, that he won’t.”

“Oh yes, he will ; I am nearly sure he will. I am sure——”

“You may be as sure as you like, but you are wrong all the same. As to that baby, I didn’t want it, I know ; it’s the greatest rot being a grand-uncle ; but if it was to come, of course I ought to have been asked to be its godfather.”

“And of course you will.”

“Very well, you know best, of course ; only I happen to have heard,” said Teddy, doggedly—“I happen to have heard the opposite. If you would only listen to me, I could tell you not only who are to be asked, but who *have been* asked ; for I saw the letters lying on the slab, waiting for the post.”

“You don’t say so, Teddy. Well ?”

“And, to make sure, I asked Robert.”

“Oh, you did?—oh. You didn’t ask Robert as if you had been looking, Teddy dear?” said Lady Matilda, rather dubiously.

“Not a bit of it. I merely pointed to the letters with my whip, as if they had just caught my eye. I had been looking at them all the time he was up-stairs with you. However, he was not to know that; so I poked them carelessly as we passed by, and said, ‘Godfathers, eh, Robert?’ in the easiest manner possible. So then he told me at once that he had written to them this morning.”

“Bless the man! no grass grows under his feet. Well, Teddy,” louder, “well, and who are they?”

“A Mr Whewell, and a Mr Challoner.”

“A Mr Whewell, and a Mr Challoner. And who are they? What are they? Did you not hear anything about them?”

“Oh, I heard a lot, but I didn’t listen.”

“Stupid fellow. Why, I want to know. Why, Ted, my dear boy, how unutterably tiresome you can be when you try! Mr Whe-

well, and Mr Challoner. Depend upon it, Mr Whewell is—stop, I know. He is that very clever amusing young barrister who came down in the summer. You remember? We all wondered how Robert ever contrived to pick up such a friend. I am glad it is Mr Whewell. If Mr Whewell should come down to Endhill, we must see him again; he must come and shoot at Overton and chirp us up a bit. Those Appleby girls will be glad to come and make up the party at dinner: we owe them something, and this will do exactly. Well, and Mr Challoner? Challoner”—musing—“Challoner; that name I never heard before. Challoner! I rather like it. Teddy, can't you tell me something, anything, about this Mr Challoner?”

“No,” said Teddy, calmly, “I can't.”

“Not if he is old or young, rich or poor, black or white?”

“I don't know.”

“Is he a school friend, or a college friend, or a relation friend.”

"I don't know."

"Is he—has he ever been here before?"

"I don't know."

"Is he——"

"Now, look here," said Teddy, suddenly, "just you stop that. I don't mind your talking as much as you please—as much as Robert does, if you like,—but I won't have questions. It's no use questioning *me*; I ain't going to stand it. I have told you already that I don't know; and when I have once said 'I don't know,' nothing you can say will make me know."

CHAPTER V.

MATILDA LONGS TO TASTE THE DOUBTFUL CUP
AGAIN.

“ I live and lack ; I lack and have ;
I have ; and miss the thing I crave.”

—GASCOIGNE.

ROBERT HANWELL, like other people, sometimes hit the mark without knowing it.

In the two notes which he despatched inviting his two friends severally to stand sponsors for the newborn son and heir, and for that purpose to come down shortly to Endhill for the christening, he held out an inducement which neither of them could resist. It cannot be said that either of the gentlemen thus appealed to was devoted to Robert: he and his concerns were as little

known as they were of little interest to them : his marriage had cost them each a present, and it appeared that the birth of his son was likely to do the same,—and that was about all,—or, at least, would have been all, had not to each invitation a clause been appended—a mere postscript, an after-thought it was—which made the announcement infinitely more interesting, and the summons more seductive. “The pheasant-shooting at Overton is remarkably good,” wrote Robert, “and I have no doubt Lord Overton would be happy to give you a few days in the covers.” He had folded up Challoner’s note before even recollecting to say this, and indeed it was perhaps more the satisfaction of being able to answer for Lord Overton’s obligingness than anything else which induced him to pause, unfold the sheet, add the P.S., and then say the same thing to Whewell. In the matter of shooting, Lord Overton was good-nature itself, and could be counted on to grant a request for a day at any time ; indeed, as it was so easily

obtained, and as nobody either at Overton or Endhill cared much about it, Mr Hanwell threw in the brief suggestion, as we have seen, in the background of his letter, little imagining the effect it would produce in changing the aspect of the whole affair in the eyes of his friends.

Both, as it happened, were good shots, and neither was possessed of good shooting.

In consequence, they rose like greedy fish to the bait, and swallowed whole the tempting morsel,—indeed, while gladly agreeing “to be present on the interesting occasion,” Robert might almost have seen in their eager assent a devout wish that it could have been held earlier. Challoner indeed went so far as to feel every time he looked at the sky, the soft grey cloudy October sky, that he was being defrauded of that day in the Overton woods; while Whewell, boxed up in dreary law courts and dismal chambers, solaced himself by getting through all the work he possibly could beforehand, in order to leave him-

self free, should the few days specified by his friend extend themselves to the length of a week. A week he might be able to spare, when pheasants were in the question.

And as to the chance of his being invited on, he had not very much anxiety on that head, since there were not many things he could not compass if he had a mind to do so; neither were there many people he could not get round. As for Robert Hanwell! Robert Hanwell would most certainly do as he was bid.

Two "very happys" accordingly were received at Endhill, two silver mugs were promised, and two gentlemen would be forthcoming when wanted.

"I told you they would be pleased," said Robert, as he read aloud the replies to his wife. "I felt that they would, and it really is something to please a man like Whewell, Lotta. Whewell is quite one of the most rising men of the day; I had my doubts about asking him—asking him to come down

here at least; to a man so overwhelmed with work it almost seemed — but, however, I thought he could only refuse. You see he does not refuse; he accepts in the pleasantest manner possible; and so does Challoner. To tell the truth, I did not fancy it was much in Challoner's line either. Challoner is peculiar. Well, Lotta, we are fortunate in everything, you and I; I trust, my dear, I trust," added the young man with a sense of saying something serious—"I trust we always shall be."

Lotta trusted so too, and agreed with dear Robert in everything. There never was so good a patient, so admirable a mother. She ate, drank, slept, rested, nursed her infant, did everything Mrs Burrble told her, and of herself refrained from doing anything which Mrs Burrble would have forbidden her; and the upshot of it all was, that at the end of three weeks, the neat little brougham was brought round from the stables, and into it stepped Mr and Mrs Robert Hanwell, baby and nurse,

and off they all drove to Overton to pay a state visit.

“Well, and when are they coming?” inquired Lady Matilda, who by this time knew all about the expected guests, and took the liveliest interest in their approach. “And has the day been fixed?”

“Yes indeed, mamma—Sunday next; I thought you knew,” replied Mrs Lotta, with her little air of superiority. “I am sure I told you,” added she.

“Sunday? That’s not proper. Do you allow people to arrive on a Sunday?”

“My dear mamma, what do you mean? No people are going to arrive on a Sunday. I said baby’s christening was to be on Sunday.” And in the young matron’s tone was heard plainly enough, “You really are a very tiresome person, but I have to put up with you!”—“Surely it was the christening you inquired about?” concluded Lotta, wearily.

“Yes, yes—yes, of course; at least something of the sort.” Poor Lady Matilda

blushed a little, for to be sure it was something of the sort of which she ought at least to have been thinking, and not of two young gallants of whom she knew nothing or next to nothing, and with whom she need have nothing whatever to do. It was absurd her caring whether they came or not; and yet visitors—that is to say, visitors of the right sort—were so very few and far between at the Hall, that her curiosity might have been pardoned. Overton had never made a friend, while Teddy had had, as years went on, to be gently weaned from his,—and the consequence was that, as Matilda would now and then in a freak of *ennui* declare, no one but old women and poor relations ever found their way to the Hall.

“And how well you look, dear!” cried she, now; “and what a little darling he is! Grandmamma’s cloak and hood too. Give him to me, nurse; I know the proper arm to take him upon by this time. Look, Overton; Overton, you have not half enough ad-

mired my grandson, and yet I do believe that it is you whom he is like."

"Indeed, my lady, I do declare it is then," chimed in the nurse, to whom a lord was a lord, and who would have sworn a resemblance to Beelzebub himself could she have hailed him as a relation. "Indeed I saw it from the very first—from the day his lordship was over at Endhill, did I not, ma'am?" appealing to her own lady.

"He is a little like uncle Overton about the—hair," said Lotta, doubtfully.

"Or lack of it," observed her other uncle.

"A most decided likeness, *I* think," pronounced Robert, to the surprise of all. But the truth was the likeness was there, and somehow they had hit upon it among them. The ugly little baby was like its ugly little grand-uncle; and the father, who had been one of the first to catch the resemblance, now resolved to avow the same manfully.

"What an absurd baby you are!" cried Matilda, delighted with the scene, "to go

and choose Overton, of all people. Now if it had been Teddy or me—*we* are the beauties of the family, aren't we, Teddy? So if you had done that, how much more wise and sensible you would have shown yourself, little master, eh?"

"Mamma," began Lotta's reminding voice.

"Dear Overton, you are not beautiful," pursued the heedless Matilda——

——"I think we are making much too long a visit," interposed Robert.

——"And so the poor little man has to go because he is like you," concluded the wicked grandmother.

She begged Overton's pardon with tears of laughter afterwards: she made both him and Teddy merry with her representation of the scene, by turns perking herself up upon the sofa to mimic Mrs Lotta's prim attitude; bustling about to show the politic nurse, deaf and blind apparently to anything amiss; or edging herself towards the door with every gesture of Robert's—the pompous, annoyed,

tongue-tied Robert, so visibly, palpably disapproving, and yet so helpless,—nothing had been lost upon her. It was not until some time afterwards that she recollected that, after all, no more had been known after the visit than before it of the brilliant Whewell, and the unexplored Challoner.

She had indeed interrogated her son-in-law, though to little purpose.

Whewell he appeared to stand in some awe of, and to know very little about; while regarding Challoner he had but one idea,—“It struck me that he was a suitable person,” he said.

“A suitable person?” quoth Matilda, in reply. “A suitable person. Oh, I think,” drily, “I think, Robert, I understand;” for by this time Robert’s predilection for “suitable people” was no secret to her.

“So now, Teddy, we shall see what we shall see,” nodded she thereafter—namely, on the afternoon when the two gentlemen were due at Endhill, and when the brother and

sister, bearing ostensibly Overton's invitation to shoot and dine, but in reality gratifying their own curiosity, hurried over to inspect. "We shall see what we shall see," said Matilda, speaking for both as was her wont, though the desire to see was perhaps only her own.

She it was who alone cared for a novelty at Overton Hall, and it was only now and then that she did so care. Why she did at all it is not, however, difficult to imagine, when it is remembered that she was a woman, and a woman who, while happy in seclusion, could nevertheless shine in society. She liked—could she help it?—being admired and applauded. She had felt now and then the fascination, the thrill of being *first* with some one—the loadstar of one pair of eyes, the magnet for one pair of feet—the ear for one speaker, *the* thought of one thinker. Yes, she knew what it felt like to be that. It felt nice. Even when nothing came of it,—and nothing as we know ever had come

of it—since the late Mr Wilmot's courtship had been conducted on the least romantic principles, and could not therefore be considered in the running,—even when nothing came of it, there still remained a recollection of something different from the ordinary everyday comfort of matter-in-fact life. The glamour had been cast on her path once and again, and she had dreamed, and she had suffered. People had predicted that Lady Matilda Wilmot would infallibly be caught again some day, and it had been whispered that a deadly mischief had been done to the heart of this one and that one; that poor Lord George had left the Hall with a longer face than the one he brought there, and that Colonel Jack had changed his regiment and gone abroad soon after his long wintry visit at Overton. He had said he could not stand another English winter, and perhaps that was why he had never reappeared in the neighbourhood. Every one blamed the lovely

widow; but perhaps, after all, mistakes are made sometimes.

Those days, however, are past and gone, and if wounds have been made or received, they are healed by time's blessed hand. Lord George is wedded, the Colonel toasts "the ladies" without a tremor, and the lady in particular, the lady to whom his thoughts refer, thinks of him with equal ease and tenderness. He is become a pleasant memory, and even the painful spot is sunlit in the past.

Yes, a heart-whole woman lives at the Hall, a woman with all a woman's hopes and fears—fain to look forward, yet neither ashamed nor reluctant to look back,—able to do without lovers, but not unwilling, not altogether loath,—oh, Teddy, beware! Oh, Teddy, as you gallop along the soft wet sward, under the dropping leaves, beneath the murky sky, beware, beware,—by fits and starts Matilda longs to taste the doubtful cup again.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TWO GODFATHERS.

“ By wonder first, and then by passion moved,
They came ; they saw ; they marvelled ; and they loved.”

—PRIOR.

It was plain by the whole look of Endhill that the expected guests had arrived, when Lady Matilda and her brother rode in at the gate.

The gate stood open ; that of itself showed that Robert was not about. Fresh wheel-marks were visible along the muddy lane without, and the wheels had sunk into the gravel of the little drive, while an unmistakable station-fly stood in the stable-yard.

Robert had not met his friends, for which omission he was doubtless at the present

moment ladling out excuses and apologies; but the friends were there, and that was everything.

Lady Matilda hopped off her horse like a bird, full of glee at thus, by her smartness, depriving her son-in-law of the felicity of offering his solemn useless assistance; and she had run into the house, and opened the drawing-room door, before any one could make a ceremony of the matter. Teddy had followed, as in duty bound, close at his sister's heels, and there stood the two—the happy, naughty, provoking two,—there they stood, as pleased as possible, Lady Matilda's hat awry, and a splash of mud on Teddy's cheek,—just as Robert was turning round from the window to announce in his most measured accents, "I think, Lotta, I hear horses. Is your mother likely to be over to-day?"

Sure enough he had heard horses, even though by common consent the horses' hoofs had been kept to the softest side of the drive,

and muffled, as it were, more and more as the house was neared,—he had heard, as he could not help hearing, when they came round the last corner, and got into the deep gravel at the entrance door; but as the drawing-room window looked not that way, and as it was, moreover, shut on account of the day being damp, he had fancied himself very quick, and that the riders were yet a good way off, when, behold! they were in the room. How had they got in? How had they made good their entrance without bells ringing, servants flying, bustle and importance? He had not heard a sound of any kind.

“William was in front,” explained Lady Matilda, with bright unconcern, “so he took our horses, and we just came in.”

Now, was not that like her? She “just came in,”—just did what she fancied on the spur of the moment, with no regard to anything or any one; and here he had had no time to tell who or what she was, no chance

of making the most of Overton and the best of its people, not even for putting more than that one hasty question ere it was so abruptly and indecorously answered.

Of course Whewell and Challoner looked surprised,—well they might. He supposed that silly feather-headed creature did not care a straw for that, or, more likely, plumed herself upon it as a compliment, without a notion that she had made a mistake, and that she could never now take the place he had meant her to take in his friends' estimation.

Well, it was no use crying over spilt milk ; the thing was done, and could not be undone ; and, tiresome as it was, it had this in its favour—it showed, and that broadly, upon what easy terms the two families stood. And, to be sure, Lady Matilda was still Lady Matilda, and Teddy, mud and all, was still the Hon. Edward Lessingham ; divest themselves as they might of every outward circumstance of rank—trample their dignity under foot and

throw propriety to the four winds of heaven, as they habitually did—the brother and sister must still belong to their order, they could not absolutely unfrock themselves.

With a sense of returning peace to his soul, but, nevertheless, with a stifled sigh and inward frown for what might have been had they, oh, had they only been all he would have had them, Mr Hanwell crossed the room, and confronted the graceless couple. They had not even the sense to see, or at any rate to care—he was by no means sure that the lurking light in Matilda's eye did not mean that she *did* see—how ruthlessly she had upset his programme.

He had meant to send over a note, (for in notes he shone,) to the effect that his friends had arrived, were to spend a few days at Endhill, as Lord Overton might remember he had told him they were expected to do, and that he would esteem it a favour if they might be granted a day in the covers, provided Lord Overton had made no other

shooting arrangements, either for the end of that week or the beginning of the next. Why he could not have asked before, no mortal knew; probably some vague idea that he might be thrown over by the two mighty men he had chosen, at the last moment, had to do with it,—probably he had ere now thus suffered, since no very strong counter-attraction would have been needed to make any one throw over Robert Hanwell; but at any rate he had thought it best to be on the safe side, and to have his birds in his hand before reckoning too securely on them.

But the note was written and ready, and there it lay on the hall table, waiting to be despatched by special bearer, as soon as the anticipated arrival should have actually taken place, and as soon as William could have seen the flyman off the premises. For this cause the dogcart had not gone to meet the train; the horse—he had but one—was required for William; William was to have ridden to Over-

ton, and so to have timed his arrival there, as to have caught Lord Overton on his return from his daily walk, when it might be counted upon that he would answer at once, and answer favourably. The answer would arrive while dinner was going on at Endhill, and it would be an agreeable diversion to have it brought in, and be able to read it aloud, and give round the invitation which was to prove so welcome.

All of this had not been thought out without care and pains ; and it must be conceded that some pity was due to a man who had spent all his leisure moments that day in concocting an elaborate strategic epistle, and had wasted three good sheets of paper over writing it.

The whole arrangement was blasted. He had known it would work well, had hoped so much, and thought so much, and, since leave in general terms had been already granted, had looked forward so much to seeing the matter thus properly and decently brought to a climax,—and now all was undone. By

Teddy's look, important and eager, he was too plainly charged with a purpose, and that purpose the dullest could divine; Matilda had obtained the invitation from one brother, and had passed it on to the other to deliver, and the whole patronage and *éclat* of the proceeding was taken out of Robert's hands.

He would not, however, allow himself to be overpowered even by this. "Take the easy-chair, Lady Matilda; Lotta has the sofa, you know; but I believe you like the chair best. What a cold day for you to be out!" (he knew perfectly well that no cold day ever stopped her;) "really we had hardly expected to see any one from Overton to-day; and the roads are so bad too. You find the fire too much? Lotta, my dear, where is the glass screen? I saw it this moment; oh, behind you;—not at all," (to offers of help,)—"I can manage it myself perfectly. Don't move, Lady Matilda—pray don't move. Will you have a cushion? A footstool?" Poor man, he did his best for her, and she would not give him

any help, not the tiniest atom of help. It was cruel of Matilda. Cushion? Footstool? She sat a yard off the cushion, and with her little foot kicked away the footstool,—kicked it away under his very nose.

“What’s all this about, Robert? Get me some tea—there’s a good man. Baby well, Lotta?”

At least she asked for the baby; she generally did that, but as likely as not she would never ask to see it; and there she was sitting on the edge of her chair, pulling off her gloves, tipping back her hat, as straight as an arrow, and as bright and pert as a humming-bird—and this was the baby’s grandmother.

He stole a glance at his friends. Challoner was still in the window, gazing absently out; it would be hard to say whether he had heard or seen or wondered at anything. Challoner, he now remembered, always had been noted for keeping his feelings to himself; and Whewell,—Lady Matilda was at the moment turning up her face to Whewell, who was

standing near, and whom she had recognised without any hesitation at once. She was making a remark about his railway journey down. "You must have come through floods," she said.

"Floods? Yes. Yes—it was very bad—very wet. I mean the whole place was under water," replied the young man, at a momentary loss to remember, when thus called upon, the real state of the case. At least so it seemed; but the truth was this, it was another lapse of memory that was troublesome, he had forgotten Lady Matilda herself, or, to be more exact, he had forgotten, clean forgotten that she was what he now found her. He had had no recollection, no impression of any one of that kind; he had seen her among a number, bright, handsome, gay, and well dressed,—but then, others had been so likewise, and he met pretty women every day in London. It was beholding her thus in the little cottage room, by the side of her homely daughter, it was meeting her thus suddenly and unexpectedly,

that made him stare and stammer. In another minute he was himself again.

For Whewell prided himself above all things on being a man of the world, and he would have despised himself had he not been equal to any occasion, however puzzling. He drew a breath, drew nearer, held a chair, then sat down on it, and in the shortest time possible he and Matilda were in the full flow of chat, without either apparently feeling it in the least necessary to include others in their conversation.

Lotta, who, erewhile in all her glory as hostess, as semi-invalid, or at least convalescent, and at any rate as chief person on the interesting occasion which had brought the two gentlemen down, had been busy with Mr Whewell, and who had thought they were all very snug and comfortable, and that every one must feel how much nicer it was to be within doors on that dreary afternoon, with a good fire and a prospective tea-tray, than wandering aimlessly about the garden and

grounds as Robert had at first proposed,—Lotta, poor thing, now resented, no less than her husband did, the disturbing of all their little elements. She did not care to talk to uncle Edward—(who, indeed, showed no symptoms of any desire to talk to her)—and since mamma had usurped Mr Whewell, there was no one left. Mr Challoner stuck to his window like a leech, and Robert had returned to him; so, since the other four were thus left, and since mamma and uncle Edward had chosen to come—it was a pity they had come, but since they had—they ought, at least, to have helped out the visit by making it a sociable general affair. She had been getting on delightfully with Mr Whewell before the others came, but now he had no chance of saying a word to her. It was not his fault—of course it was not; but mamma would always be first, and she seemed to forget altogether sometimes that she had a grown-up daughter, and a married daughter to boot. Mamma really ought to think of this. It was

quite rude to Mr Whewell taking him up in this way, when she, Lotta, as lady of the house and his friend's wife, ought to have been paying him attention: it looked as if he had bored her before, and he had not bored her in the least. She had liked him very much, and he had talked so nicely, and seemed so interested in all she said, and had asked so much about baby, and shown so evidently that he had been pleased to be godfather, that altogether she had felt they were going to be great friends: and then mamma came in, and took him away, and he was never able to renew the conversation; but she was sure he had been quite vexed at being so interrupted.

A good deal of this was for Robert's ear afterwards, and a good deal passed through Charlotte's mind at the time; but outwardly, Mrs Hanwell merely sat up on her sofa, in one of her best dresses, taking care not to ruffle or soil the frills of her sleeves as she poured out the tea with rather a grave face, and an air that betrayed to all that Lotta felt herself out

in the cold, and that this, for a young matron with a partial spouse, and an excellent opinion of his judgment as well as her own, was a novel and not entirely pleasing sensation.

Lady Matilda drank her tea, and sent back her cup for more.

The grateful beverage sent up a yet warmer colour into her cheek, and she looked her best—her smiling glowing best,—while poor Lotta, sullen and forlorn, was bereft of all the very small share of outward attractiveness she ever possessed.

It could not pass unnoticed, the contrast. Whewell saw it, even as he held the cup : mean man, he stayed several minutes by Lotta's side, making his peace, as he told himself, with the tea-maker, and this was how his thoughts were employed !—he noted the curious difference between the two, betwixt the placid, dull, expressionless mask now before him, and the brilliant changeful features to which he was returning. Was it likely he would stay long ? Can it be won-

dered at that all the little bustle over the sugar-basin and the cream-jug could not detain him?

True, he came and went more than once, but it was always on the one lady's errands: he had to bring her bread-and-butter and cake, as well as to have her cup filled twice; he stood about, he fetched and carried, and he stepped backwards and forwards, but it was always backwards, backwards, his feet took him finally; until at length, the business over, and the last attention paid, he fairly settled himself down by Matilda's side, and neither looked at nor spoke to any one else during the remainder of her stay. It was enough: Lady Matilda saw that she was noticed, more than noticed, and frankly she allowed to herself that it was for this she had come. She knew that she was charming, and sometimes the knowledge was too much for her; it needed a vent; it wanted some one to applaud, admire, and flatter; and, no disrespect to Mr Frank Whewell, she would, in her

then mood, have made eyes at a field scarecrow.

But we must give our readers some idea of Whewell.

From earliest years he had shown the germ of such mental powers as succeed best in life. He had not been a thinking boy; he had not puzzled his masters and tutors, nor set his parents cogitating about his future; but he had made the most of every talent he possessed, and those talents had been not a few. Concentration, grasp, alertness, tact, and fluency of language, all pointed out unmistakably his path in life. He was to go to the bar, and if he went to the bar, there was no doubt in any one's mind that he would do well; he would succeed, rise, and one day rule. So far every favourable prognostication had been fulfilled; nothing had hindered or thwarted a career which seemed to be one continued triumph; and though higher heights were still to be climbed, and greater obstacles yet remained to be overcome, there was no

reason why, with ordinary good fortune, he should not go on as he had begun; ambition was his ruling passion, and ambition is an irresistible spur.

But in the little drawing-room at Endhill during the hour that Lady Matilda spent there, Whewell showed himself in another light to what he usually appeared before the world. He liked women, and he liked to be liked by them. Apart from his profession, he liked nothing so well as to talk with them, to listen to their soft replies, to their hopeless arguments, to their sweet laughter. It was a delicious relief to his tired brain to allow itself to be at ease as it were in their presence, to permit himself to ramble over metaphorical hedges and ditches in his talk, avoiding as the very plague the straight hard road which led direct to the point—that very road he would pursue so relentlessly when wig and gown were on; and it gave him an excusable feeling of satisfaction to perceive that while the latter course prevailed with men, and

made him what he was and where he was, the former won for him the golden opinions of the other sex.

Now much of his popularity he put down to his good looks. He valued his handsome face still more than his versatile ability, and therefore the face, or at least Whewell's general appearance, ought to be described. He was getting on to forty in years, but he had looked forty ever since he was nineteen, and would continue to do so until he was ninety. The boys at school had nicknamed him "Grandfather," and by-and-by people would infallibly observe how young he looked, and the same eyes, hair, and mouth would do duty for both observations: he had not changed a feature or gained or lost anything since going to the university. But he was undeniably personable. He had a slight, firm, well-knit figure, raven-black hair, an aquiline nose, a small well-shaped mouth, a quick turn of the head, and an eye so keenly apprehensive and inquisitive that it seemed at once

to take possession of whatever it looked upon.

And of all these good things no one was more aware than Whewell himself.

He thought they gained him female friends, and perhaps in this he was right; but he went still further, and in this he was undoubtedly wrong. It was his fixed idea that no amount of talent would ever make an ugly face palatable to a woman—whereas the truth is that women like, ay and love, ay and worship, ugly faces every day.

Lady Matilda could have told her lively friend as much; but very likely if she had, he would not have believed her. And since the cleverest of us must sometimes be at fault, and since such was the opinion of the sagacious barrister, it will surprise no one to hear that the opinion was shared by the sagacious Teddy.

“Oh, you thought him very good-looking, no doubt,” said Teddy, when at length the two took their leave and found themselves

on their way home ; “ very good-looking, and vastly pleasant. I’ll be bound you did that. Talking away to him there the whole time, and sitting on till it was so dark that we had to have candles. I was quite ashamed of staying so long. I thought we were never going to get away, and there was Lotta fidgeting and fidgeting, and Robert looking round from the window,—what on earth did you do it for ? ” he broke off suddenly. “ I am sure they didn’t want us all that while.”

“ Did they not ? Oh yes, they did ; or, at least, they ought if they did not,” returned his sister, gaily. “ I am sure they were deeply in our debt ; I am sure they owed to us the whole success of the afternoon. It was a success, don’t you think ? And imagine what it might have been ! Failure is not the word. Think, Teddy, of a whole afternoon, a wet afternoon, an afternoon hopeless of interruption or variety or anything, with only Robert and Lotta ! Picture to yourself that delightful Mr Whewell——”

——“Delightful ! nonsense.”

“Wrecked upon Lotta, stranded upon Lotta, submerged in Lotta,” pursued Matilda, merrily. “Lotta with her eternal talk about cooks and babies, and ‘our arrangements for this,’ and ‘our ideas about that’; Teddy, put yourself in Mr Whewell’s place, and feel for a moment as he felt. They were in the thick of it when we came in; I saw it in the victim’s face; and even if his face had been hidden, he would have been betrayed by his hanging head and dejected mien.”

“How you *do* talk ! ‘Hanging head and dejected mien,’ what on earth—I saw no hanging head. I am sure he seemed as fit a little cock-sparrow as I have ever seen, jabbering away to you by the yard.”

“So he did,—when he had me to jabber to. I rescued him out of the Slough of Despond, and he had the wit to be very tenderly grateful to his deliverer, moreover; and the grace to rate his deliverance at its proper value, or I am mistaken. Come, Master Ted,” cried

Matilda, in her sauciest tones—"come, sir, don't be sulky. You did your best; you did as well as any could have expected, and as much as in you lay; but you must own that to me—me—me, belongs '*la gloire et la victoire*.' There. Understand that, eh? I did it all: I enlivened a dull visit, took compassion on an unfortunate stranger, and drew him forth from the very jaws of domesticity. Did I not do well for him? I think I did. I think he was worth it, and that he will feel now that there is some one, even in this benighted spot, on whom he is not altogether thrown away."

"Great cheek if he ever thought anything of the kind." Teddy had had enough of Whewell, and had, moreover, been ill used all through the visit by everybody. "I was quite astonished to see you make yourself so cheap to that fellow," he proceeded severely. "You were so taken up with him, that you had not a word for the other one, and he looked by a long way the better of the two."

"Glad you thought so. But I left him for *you*. *You* were civil to him, I hope?"

"I? No. How could I? I never had the chance. Robert monopolised him, as you did Whewell. I had nobody."

"Nobody! What are you saying, bad boy? Do you call your own married niece, in her own house, and at her own tea-table, nobody?"

"She is nobody, all the same. She is the stupidest creature—well, you know what I mean," he broke off and drew in a little, since, after all, Lotta was Matilda's child,—“you know,” he added, apologetically, “you think so yourself.”

"No—no—no. No, Teddy, I never said that. Fie, Teddy! you encroach; you must not say such things; and I would not have any one but me hear you for the world."

"Is it likely I should say it to any one but you?"

"You m—ight. It might slip out. Do be careful."

"Of course I'll be careful: I always am careful; but Lotta is a regular dolt. Except when she was looking at you, she had about as much expression as a Chinese mandarin."

"And when she was looking at me?"

"I say, she didn't like Whewell going over to you, you know."

"Did she not?"

"She thought you were poaching on her lands."

"So I was."

"Why did you do it? I should not have done it had I been you."

"You would, had you been me—that is just it. Oh, I had no particular reason for 'doing it,' as you call it; I just had the inclination; I wanted to amuse myself. And then I thought that if I had the one, you could have the other. I could entertain Mr Whewell, and you Mr Challoner."

"Robert and Lotta each other?" said Teddy, with a grin.

"Oh, they never do anything for any-

body; they are no count. You see I took Mr Whewell, and if you had done as much for Mr Challoner there would have been nothing for anybody to complain of."

"By Jove, that *is* hard! when there was I who would have been thankful of any one, stuck down all by myself in a chair by the fire, with yards of carpet in front of me; and there was Challoner, or whatever his name is, away at the far end of the room, with his back to me, mumbling away to Robert, and Robert to him, without stopping once the whole time; and now you speak as if I had—as if it had been my fault!"

"Don't be incoherent, my dear; how am I to tell what you mean when you muddle up your sentences in that way? And there is nothing to excite your wrath either. I merely meant to suggest that probably the luckless Challoner would have preferred your company to Robert's; and after all, that is nothing to take umbrage at."

"Humph,"—mollified, however.

“What was he like, Ted?”

“Like? I don’t know. I never thought of it. He was like other people, I suppose.”

“Like other people? Oh! Not in any way particular?”

“Well, not in any way particular. No, I don’t think he was.”

“But you must have seen *something*?” urged Matilda. “You, who had nothing else to do, and no one to listen to, and no one to look at——”

——“I had. I had you to look at.”

“Me!” cried she.

“I was wondering what you did it for, and what you could possibly see in that puppy to make such a work about.”

“What did I see? Well, now you ask me that in a friendly way, brother, and not in an acrimonious carping backbiting spirit, I will answer you candidly: I don’t think I saw very much.”

“And yet you talked to no one else?”

“And yet I talked to no one else.”

“Come, I am tired of the subject,” cried she, suddenly ; “come, away with it !”—and starting her horse to a canter, nothing further passed of any note between the pair for the time being.

CHAPTER VII.

“A PRETTY SCRAPE YOU WILL GET INTO.”

“It is good discretion not to make too much of any man at the first, because one cannot hold out that proportion.”—BACON.

LADY MATILDA'S sole impression of Challoner had been that of a tall, broad, listless man, leaning against the window-pane in the drawing-room, the while he yielded a sort of pensive half attention to the platitudes of her son-in-law. Whether these had suited him or not, no one could tell. He had not seemed to respond much certainly, but he had listened—presumably, at least, he had listened,—and undeniably he had not turned away. He had stood still where he was, and had let the stream flow over his head, and that in itself

was enough. He had not broken loose, shaken off his host, crossed the room, and drawn near to *her*; and this was what he should have done to have found any favour in Matilda's eyes. A man ought not to be tamely broken on the wheel; he ought, he surely ought to make some sort of struggle with his fate—some desperate resistance, even when resistance is fruitless. But Challoner had shown no fight, even no inclination to fight: he was beneath her notice.

She would not waste pity or sympathy upon one so insensate—would not throw away gentle amenities on one so indiscriminating; while Whewell—Whewell, who had at once bent beneath her sway, and who had shown himself so apt, so responsive, and so appreciative—Whewell should have all her smiles.

Here at least was one who knew how to value the good fortune which had befallen him in that most ill-favoured spot, who could appreciate having a Lady Matilda to talk to and to look at, who could discern between her

and the inert Lotta and the insufferable Robert. Here was one who could claim a privilege and make the most of an opportunity; and the vain creature coloured ominously in front of her glass that evening as she recalled glances and speeches, and the whole little scene at Endhill,—Lotta's prim, prudish attitude, Teddy's impatience, and Whewell's exclusive devotion.

He, Whewell, had had neither eyes nor ears for any one but herself. He had pushed out into the hall by her side when she went, had held her foot and put it in the stirrup as she mounted, and had been the last to go inside as they rode off, standing bareheaded out in the chill November air to watch them down the drive.

She could guess with what reflections he stood there; she could picture to herself, or thought she could, what were his probable sensations and anticipations at the present moment,—how gladly he would have exchanged his quarters had this been possible,

and how joyfully he would appear at Overton next day.

“They will not come till dinner-time,” she announced to her brothers. “Robert had a dozen unanswerable reasons why they should not dress here, so we are not to expect anybody till eight o’clock. When they have done their worst on our pheasants, they will come and inflict themselves on us. They are all coming, every man-Jack of them, as Teddy would say. Robert has engaged for the party generally. By the way, I did not say anything about it to Lotta; but I do not suppose that will signify. She will be quite satisfied if dear Robert has arranged it; and dear Robert has taken it upon himself, after due references and inquiries, to answer in the name of everybody. One thing is, he will see that they all turn up, and that not one of them is late. They will be here at eight o’clock to the second, if he die in the attempt. Happily it is dark so long before then, that the poor men will not have their sport curtailed by his anxieties, as those others had

in partridge-time. I did pity them ; I knew how it must have been exactly. Woe betide the unfortunate finger that ever steals to the trigger, once Herr Robert has decreed that time is up ! He will never forgive that shot, more especially if it kills. Well, perhaps it is a good thing for all our sakes that my son-in-law is no sportsman ; but what would I not give to make him unpunctual, even ordinarily, decently unpunctual ?"

"What do you call being decently unpunctual ?" said Overton.

"When a man stands with his watch in his hand, and will have you know the time when you don't want to know it, it's not decent," replied she.

"Was that what happened this afternoon ?" inquired her brother, cracking his walnuts,—for the three were sitting cosily together over their dessert, and Matilda was, as usual, doing most of the conversation.

"No, Mr Inquisitive, it was not what happened this afternoon," retorted she. "Oh,

Overton," her attention diverted, "I do wish I could crack single walnuts in my hand as you do. I can't think how you do it," stretching out a white arm, and screwing up a soft and shapely hand with desperate energy. "I have tried again and again, and I never can—oh!"—with a final and utterly ineffectual wrench.

"You couldn't crush a spider with that!" said Teddy, disdainfully. "With that little bit of a wrist you have not any power. There is nothing easier than walnuts," performing the feat again and again. "But, I say, Mattie, what made you give the invitation to those people to-day? I thought you told me that *I*——"

"Of course I did, and you saw I left to you the shooting arrangements; but I had to do something myself; my dear Teddy, Robert's face must have shown you that I had to do something to pacify the storm. We were in the wrong box, you and I; we were dreadful offenders——"

"How?" said Teddy, opening his eyes.

"We had come before our time, my friend."

"Had we? But what did that matter? We did it to be civil; we thought it was a friendly thing to do. What should they come for, then? I'm sure *we* didn't want them."

"Oh, you dear innocent, you don't half know Robert yet. It was all very well our showing attention, hospitality, and so forth; but we, you and I, our two selves in the bodily presence, Ted, *were not wanted*. Can you understand that now? Overton can. He thinks he never is wanted, which is a mistake, on the other hand. If he, now, had found his august way over to Endhill to-day, he would have met with a different reception; but as it was, it was only poor Teddy and Matilda," shaking her head with mock mournfulness, "and they were sadly in the way."

"And what good did the invitation do?" said Overton, intercepting an indignant protest from his brother.

"Oh, it soothed the ruffled feelings in a

wonderful way. You see, dear Robert really was sadly put out, though Teddy may not believe it; he had had no time, I fancy, to get out his say, to swell and strut, and spread his plumage as he loves to do, and as he never *can* do whenever any one of us is present; and he and Lotta would fain have had their visitors to themselves for a while,—imagine what a fate for any man, let alone a Londoner and a —Whewell. However, Robert would have liked this, and he did not get it, and we—or rather I—was in disgrace. And——”

“Why you more than I?” burst in Teddy, with a black look.

“I am the lady, you know, and the lady naturally takes the lead. That was all, dear,” replied Matilda, with one of her swift transitions from sarcasm to gentleness. “That was what I meant, don’t you see?” looking at him to make sure she was saying right. “And besides, you know, Teddy, an invitation from the lady of the house always counts for more than one from any of the gentlemen—

even from you, Overton. Now does it not, Overton?" eagerly, her warning voice adding, "Say it does."

"Why, yes. Yes, of course. Every one knows that," said Overton, responding promptly to the whip. "Teddy knows that as well as any one, only he forgot at the moment."

"Oh yes, of course—of course. A fellow can't be expected to remember things like that," said Teddy, his brow clearing under the combined influence. "I did not think of it, that was all. Go on, Matilda."

"Where was I? Oh, I was telling you how Robert took my friendly overture. He never suspected, you know, that it was only thought of as we were mounting our horses; he imagined, no doubt, that the idea had been manufactured with all the labour and sorrow and *pros* and *cons* that would have gone to the making had he had a finger in the pie; and actually I did my best to foster this aspect of things. I quite turned our impromptu dinner into an important affair. You should

have seen how his grimness relaxed, and how at last a ray of sunshine stole athwart his sad cheekbone."

"Because he was asked *here?*" said Overton, incredulously.

"Because they were all asked here; because he was to bring himself, and his Lotta, and his dashing Whewell, and his statuesque Chaloner, and to trundle them all along, packed as tight as herrings in a barrel, over the hill to Overton. You look scornful, most sapient brother! Is not the cause sufficient? Oh, you do Robert injustice—you do indeed; he loves of all things to seek your sweet society, and nothing affords him greater pleasure than—we will not say to dine, but to *say that he has dined here.*"

"*Here?* Nonsense. There is nothing here to make Robert or any one care to come. We are all very well by ourselves, but for anybody else, there can be no attraction."

"Can there not? Now, really, can there not, Overton? Are we no attraction in our-

selves, you and Teddy and I?” cried Matilda, with an odd note in her voice. “You are a plain man, Overton, and will return a plain answer to a plain question. Tell me, is there no conceivable attraction here for—for any one, in you, or Teddy, or—or me?”

“None in the least, none whatever,” replied Overton promptly, for his thoughts still ran on Robert Hanwell, while hers had flown, as may have been guessed, elsewhere. “Robert wished to marry your girl, and so he chose to come and visit her here, very naturally I suppose,” with a twitch of the lip which needed no interpretation. “Since Robert wished to marry Lotta, it is to be imagined that he cared to be with her now and then beforehand, and as she was here he came here; but now—now that all that is over, there is nothing, nothing in the world to bring him out of his own snug house on a raw dark November night, when the roads are about as bad as they can be, and there is not even a moon to light their way. It is a

cool thing to ask any man to do, and I must say, Matilda, I wonder you liked to do it. I am sure I, for one, should not have ventured."

"And I am sure that I, for another, should not, very certainly, very decidedly should not, with an eye to some one else's comfort than good Robert's," said Matilda, laughing. "No indeed, that I should not, my brothers twain, had he and he alone been the proposed recipient of our hospitality. But, bethink you, there are others; and the raw dark November night, and the bad roads, and the no moon, may be no obstacle to *them*. What do you say, Teddy? Do you think that Mr Whewell would leave it? Do you think he would imperil his precious legal life in a four-mile drive through this lonely country after dark, to have another sight of—either of us?"

"Of you? Oh!" said Overton, with a smile.

"Of her, of course," added Teddy. "She is such a creature for getting round people,

that she had that ass Whewell all in a buzz before we left. You never saw anything like the way he went on, shoving through the doorway in front of me to get after her. And now she wants him over here——"

"To complete the damage done. Very good, Teddy," said Matilda, approvingly. "I never like to leave a piece of work unfinished, on principle; so, as you say that Mr Whewell has done me the honour to——"

——"To flirt with you," said Teddy, bluntly.

"Oh fie, Teddy! do not believe him, Overton. I never flirt. It is a thing I would not do upon any account; and as to flirting with Mr Whewell—we were only pleasant, pleasant to each other. And there was no one for my poor Teddy to be pleasant to, and so he is cross with his Matilda," patting his shoulder as if cajoling a fretful child. "Now, was not that it, Ted? Don't be vexed, then: it shall have some one, it shall. Let me see, to-morrow night: whom could we get over for

to-morrow night? No one but the Appleby girls, I am afraid. Will Juliet Appleby do, Teddy? She is fond of you, you know."

"I shall take Marion in," said Teddy, decidedly.

"Judy is too young, is she?"

"A wretched school-girl," with contempt.

"A tolerably forward school-girl; she has learned one lesson thoroughly, at all events. But you are wrong, Teddy, she is emerged, emancipated; she is going about everywhere now, and has been since the summer."

"I shall take Marion in," reiterated Teddy. Juliet had caused him offence last time they met, and he thus revenged himself.

"As you please," said his sister. "It does not signify, or rather it is better so; Juliet is much the prettier of the two."

"You don't call those Miss Applebys pretty, do you?" said Lord Overton, who, when quite alone with his brother and sister, could take a fair share in the conversation, and make now and then quite a good remark if not

called upon to do it. “They are so what is it—unripe?”

“And budding beauty is what poets sing about, and lovers rave about.”

“Budding, perhaps, but these are buds that will never blossom. Juliet is pink and white, but she has not a feature in her face, and Marion’s teeth would spoil the look of any mouth.”

“Well, I’ll have Marion all the same,” said Teddy, obstinately. When he had a notion in his head he stuck to it, as he said himself; and he now looked defiantly round, as if Marion’s teeth and Juliet’s pink-and-whiteness had alike been forces used against his determination. “I mean to have Marion; so there,”—bringing down his hand on the table.

“Such being the case, I give way,” replied Matilda, humouring his mood. “I give way, and Juliet has Mr Challoner; it will do that chatterbox good to have such a stone wall to expend her artillery upon; she will not get much change out of *her* companion, I should

say : then Overton takes Lotta, and Robert must go by himself. He will not mind going by himself for once, when he sees his dear Lotta in the place of honour."

That she meant to have Whewell for herself was thus evident. Challoner might have the right to give her his arm and seat himself by her side—probably had the right, since she had a tolerably distinct recollection of something having been said about his family and connections which rendered it unlikely that Whewell could be in birth his superior,—but what of that? Who was stupid enough to care for that? Certainly not Matilda Wilmot. She was not to know, or at least was not to be supposed to know; and at any rate Whewell she wanted, and Whewell she meant to have.

"And a pretty scrape you will get into with Robert if you do," Teddy reminded his sister; for he too had heard the reference to Challoner's family, and he saw what Matilda was up to, after that fashion he had of seeing

things that were not meant for him. “ You had better just look out,” he warned her.

But to no purpose. A plague on Robert ! she must now and then be in scrapes with him, and as well now as at any other time. She would have her way, and trust to her good luck and her ready tongue to make matters straight with him afterwards, for Lotta’s sake, not his own. She wished, oh, how devoutly she wished, that they could have a quarrel — a downright, out-and-out, give-and-take-no-quarter quarrel—so that they might be free of each other for evermore ; but for her child’s sake she would keep the peace — with intervals for refreshment ; and as, happily, she knew his weak points, and could lay her finger on them to heal as well as to wound at any moment, he might be put aside occasionally without much alarm as to the future. Accordingly she laughed at Teddy, and went her way unheeding.

The next evening came, and with it the expected guests. Robert was in great force,

had been in force the whole day ; and meeting the returning carriage of the Applebys as they drove up to the Hall, was just as it should be. Lady Matilda had with unwonted thoughtfulness provided two new girls for his bachelor friends, and this would be the crowning touch to a day that had been altogether successful. The two strangers had shot well and walked well, and had expressed themselves warmly on the subject : their host had little doubt of being able to obtain for them another day on the Monday, and there was nothing to mar the satisfaction and serenity with which he alighted. The footmen had on their best liveries, and his cup was full.

“Take care, Lotta. Another step, my dear. Are you all right? Fine old hall, Challoner. The pictures are not much, but they are at least genuine. Your collar is turned up, Whewell : allow me.” His “allow me” was the pinnacle of his good-humour.

But it was not destined to last long, as those who are in the wilful Matilda's con-

fidence are aware; and only too soon after the party had assembled before the drawing-room fire, did his uneasy fears arise. Until then no doubts had arisen to disturb his mind, for on this wise he had argued, that foolish and heedless as the young grandmother habitually showed herself to be, she could not go the length of this; she could not, without consulting his opinion or making due inquiries, take upon herself to decide as to which of his guests—of *his* guests—should have precedence, when brought by him to the Hall. He had, indeed, already hinted his wishes; but if, as was, alas! too possible with such an auditor, the hint—the very emphatic hint—had been thrown away, in such a case here he was himself to be appealed to, and here was a good five minutes in which to make the appeal. A whisper to him, an aside through Teddy, a nod of the head, a turn of the eye, would have done it, would have let the hostess know which to make the happy man,—and of course it was Challoner who ought to be

the man;—and as a Miss Appleby could be placed upon his other side, so that he need only have the honour of Lady Matilda, and could have the pleasure of an unmarried lady's society at the same time—(Robert was one who took it for granted that a bachelor must always prefer a “Miss”)—all being so nicely arranged, Challoner would be well off.

He watched, he waited for the signal that was to bring him into secret communications with Lady Matilda; but Lady Matilda, quite at her ease, made no sign, and he grew restless: and then, just as he was debating within himself how matters would really go, if there would be a scrimmage at the end, or what?—what should he see but Challoner, the Challoner he thought so much of, and cared so intensely to show off before, paired off with an absurd little Juliet Appleby—not even Marion, but Juliet, the school-girl—while Whewell, all radiant and triumphant, talking, bending over as he talked, gallantly escorted the hostess to the head of the table?

CHAPTER VIII.

A STRANGE EFFECT.

Unaiming charms with edge resistless fall,
 And she who means no mischief, does it all."
 —PRIOR.

NEVER had Matilda looked better.

She was glowing with life and health ; and having put on her most becoming dress and ornaments, the plain home-made frocks of two rather so-so-looking damsels, and Lotta's high morning silk with the lace *fichu*, which, when put on in her little room at Endhill, had looked quite elegant enough and quite dressy enough for a quiet dinner at her uncle's, then became all at once dowdy and ineffective.

They were all much on a par, Lotta perhaps

the worst, for Lotta had grown stout of late, and could not stand much *fichu*, besides which, there was a suspicion of being somewhat too tightly buckled in for comfort,—but still the Miss Applebys could not cast stones at her. Juliet's muslin was limp, and did not hang straight, being longer on the one side than on the other; and the lace edgings on both sisters' skirts, on the blue as well as the pink, was cheap, and looked cheap. Little threads hung out here and there, and the colour had slightly run in the washing; while to crown all, the cut on two rather meagre, scrimp, waistless young figures, was not all that could have been desired.

Lady Matilda was in black, but it was brilliant black; it was set off by freshly cut, snowy chrysanthemums, and quivering maiden-hair ferns; it was relieved by lustrous opals at her throat and in her ears; and it encircled the roundest, whitest neck and arms in the world.

Mrs Hanwell thought her mother over-

dressed. It was just like mamma, she said; and she wondered how it was that Matilda knew no better, and how she, who ordinarily seemed to care so little how she looked, or how old and shabby her clothes were when walking about the lanes, or even shopping in the town, would sometimes take it into her head to flare up into splendour, and throw every one else into the shade. And it must be confessed that the young lady who sat thus in judgment did not like being in the shade, and felt more discomposed than she would have allowed to anybody, at finding herself there. —

Her own costume was so nice, so very nice: she had herself tacked in new frilling in the neck and sleeves—her best frilling too, out of a not over-abundant supply—and it had gone to her heart to reflect how it would get crushed and soiled by her heavy fur cloak in the drive to and from the Hall; but she had felt that the occasion was sufficient. She had meant to look well, and not to grudge a little trouble, or even her favourite ruffles; she had rubbed

bright her large gold locket and chain, and put it on over the lace; and then there had been a pair of neat little bronze slippers, and mittens, and a brown fan, with a brown ribbon run through the handle to match the slippers. And a clean handkerchief, fine and soft, but not her best Honiton one, which would have been over smart, had been found for the pocket, and a pretty white scarf had been remembered for the head, and nothing had been forgotten, not even the parting directions to nurse, nor the kiss to baby, before she left Endhill.

Nobody had ever crossed the threshold there with a more complacent step; no one had ever entered the entrance-hall at Overton with a fuller sense of inward assurance.

And in half an hour all was altered, for in half an hour Lotta had had time to look about her, to take notes and to adjust her ideas, and the result was that she felt oppressed and crestfallen.

Lady Matilda had no fan, no gloves, no

bracelets, probably no handkerchief,—but her bare white arms, fringed with the glittering black, would have been insulted by a covering, and made the very idea of mittens loathsome; while the shape of her beautiful head, and the thickness of her hair, turned Lotta's little matronly cap into a superfluous and ridiculous appendage. Lotta, in short, looked as though she had not dressed—what ladies call “dressed”—at all.

“My dear, you might have made more of yourself,” Lady Matilda could not forbear murmuring aside, as the two sat on a sofa together before dinner. “You have evening gowns,” continued she, reproachfully. And then some one had spoken, and there had been no chance of explaining the why and wherefore the evening gowns referred to had not been considered suitable, and altogether it was hard on Lotta.

But her vexation was slight compared with Robert's when the move to the dining-room took place, and he beheld, as we have said, his

much too lovely, much too enchanting mother-in-law led forward to her seat by Whewell. He almost hated the agreeable barrister, and scarcely dared to look how Challoner fared. As for that wicked Matilda—but she was irreclaimable.

There she sat, by far the finest and fairest woman present; and there was his friend, but not his chief friend, not the man who should have been where he was,—there was Whewell, cocked up on high, equal to anything, delighted with everything, turning his head this way and that way, by Matilda's side. And there was Challoner—even Challoner could increase the dudgeon of the moment; for the injured, ill-treated, degraded Challoner, was eating his soup with an air of unconcern, which showed too plainly that whether he had even understood his ignominy or not was doubtful.

Further, however, than that his manner bespoke ease and enjoyment, Whewell gave no just cause for offence; he did not abuse the

prosperity which had fallen to his lot ; he did not attempt to keep Matilda's ear and attention for himself as he had done, and so successfully done, at Endhill ; he had a word, an inquiry, or remark for all about him, took part in divers conversations, told capital stories, and led the laugh with such success, that no merrier meal had ever been known at Overton. Even Robert and even Lotta resumed their usual lugubrious serenity as the courses ran on. "And even Mr Challoner, the stately Challoner, smiled upon us at last," said Matilda afterwards. "He needs waking up, does that poor Challoner. I was quite relieved to see him look more cheerful and less lackadaisical, as he and Juliet advanced in intimacy. Juliet, my dear, that must have been your doing," putting her arm round Juliet's waist as she spoke. "To you must be the credit of thawing the ice upon the Challonerean brow. And it is worth thawing, I believe. Do you know, girls, that he is—what is he, Lotta ? for I protest," laughing, "that I do not know myself."

"He is very nice," said Lotta, warmly, "very nice indeed; though mamma does not think so," with a little prick of malice.

"Mamma does not think so, indeed! Bravo, Lotta! Now, Madam Wiseacre," cried Matilda, who would always have an insinuation said out, whether the speaker liked or not—"now how, pray, do you know that mamma does not think so?"

But on this occasion Lotta was not unwilling to be explicit. "You have never taken the slightest notice of him since he came," she said. "You have never taken the trouble to speak to him, and you would not have him in to dinner."

"So that is the accusation. Now, hear me. I did far better than have him in to dinner myself; I gave him Juliet."

All were silent.

"I gave him Juliet," repeated Lady Matilda, slowly; "and I think that every young man would allow that he had the best of it in such an assortment. You are too polite, much too

polite, to say so to me, young ladies ; but you know as well as I do in your hearts that, whatever Mr Challoner's proclivities may be, a young man——”

“He is not so young at all,” observed Lotta.

“Any man at all then, or at any rate, the average man of the day, prefers a young and blushing mademoiselle to an old and unblushing—grandmother.”

“Oh, Lady Matilda !” They all laughed.

“Grandmother ! It is really too absurd,” said the eldest Miss Appleby. “When we heard about baby, you know, Lotta, the first thing we all said was, ‘Think of Lady Matilda a grandmother !’ and we laughed so—you can’t think how we laughed.”

“Lotta thinks there was nothing to laugh at,” said Lotta’s mother, looking at her with a smile ; “and it was very shocking of you, girls, to make sport out of me and my grandson. You might as well have said, ‘Think of Lotta a mother !’ That was quite as funny, I sup-

pose?" But no one looked as if they had found it so.

"Oh, Lotta seemed quite the right person to have a nursery full," said Marion, candidly. "Lotta always was sober, you know; she—oh, Lady Matilda, you should have heard what papa said!" cried the poor girl, leaving Lotta's unencouraging face to right itself. "Papa said—he is *such* an admirer of yours—and when we told him, he said that you were the handsomest and youngest woman in the county: youngest—you remember, Juliet, how he defined it? that it wasn't years and that sort of thing that made people old; and he said that if Lady Matilda had a score of grandchildren, it would make not an atom of difference."

"Thank you, my dear. Next time I see your father, I shall say aloud in his hearing that he is the dearest and most discerning old gentleman in the county; and that if there were a score of women he admired more than me, it would make not an atom of difference."

"Now, Juliet," pursued she, when all, Lotta

excepted, had done justice to the repartee,—
“now, Juliet, for Mr Challoner once more.
Mr Challoner once more to the front, please.
What is he like? What is his line? What
is there in him?”

But this was too much. “I should think,”
said Mrs Lotta, with a toss of her head, cap
and all,—“I should really imagine—at least
any one would imagine—that *I* might be the
one to know most about Mr Challoner, as he
is now actually staying in our house, and he
is Robert’s own friend; while Juliet has only
spoken to him—has only *seen* him within the
last half-hour!”

“Two hours at least, my dear: don’t be
inaccurate because you are cross. And I will
tell you why I don’t ask you for information,
—simply because I am not likely to get it.”

“Why not likely? You have never asked.
I will give it you in a moment.”

“You would, my dear, I know; and I know
what the value of it would be, and it would
be——” and Lady Matilda made a little snap

of her fingers that was hardly dignified, but was very charming. "These things are not in your way, Lotta. You were never any hand with men," which was unfair, all things considered.

"But then, she never would have been," said Lady Matilda to herself; "she has not the way with them, and never would have."

"Now, Juliet is like me—she has perception," continued she, aloud. "Juliet is a bit of scamp herself, and so I can depend on her to tell me whether she has found one in Mr Challoner or not."

"Oh, Lady Matilda!"

"Well, child, I am not blaming you—far from it; I appreciate the gift. Come, out with it, for good or for evil, for better for worse. Give us your experience, your valuable experience; Mr Challoner is——?"

"To tell you the truth, then, Lady Matilda, I would gladly have exchanged companions with you."

"You would, you monkey? I believe you; from my heart I do. What!—he was not

responsive, was he not, Juliet? Now, Lotta, be quiet. I see the man is a man of lead."

"He is not *at all*: not in the *very least*."

"Oh yes, he is: Juliet says it, and Juliet must know."

"But I did not say it, Lady Matilda," protested Juliet; "I only said, and that when you asked me, and *made* me say it——"

"I know, I know: never mind, Lotta, you goosey; nobody minds Lotta in this house—though she reigns supreme at Endhill, no doubt. But here I am the only person to be in awe of, d'ye see that?" pinching her ear. "Now get on with your tale. You gave him up? Did you give him up? Did you find him past endurance? Lotta, go away; go and talk with Marion over there: don't listen to us,—that's right! Now, Juliet?"

"I must say he was rather difficult to get on with, Lady Matilda."

"Difficult! How difficult? What shape and form did the 'difficult' take?"

“He never originated an idea, to begin with. And then he was so—don’t you know?—absent. He did not seem to take any notice—I mean he had no interest; all he cared to talk about was the shooting, and I know nothing about shooting—how should I?” said poor Juliet, plaintively. “I tried him on all sorts of other things, indeed I did. I told him all about the neighbourhood, and the people, and—and everything I could think of; and then, when I had said all I could think of, and had racked my brains to make the most of a thing, he would just answer me, and let it drop. I had to do it all over again with something else, you know. It wasn’t encouraging, was it?”

“Bad, bad,—very bad. Just what I had expected, however. I must say I object to have my pet subjects ‘let drop,’ myself; and you certainly had a hard time of it, Judy.”

“The worst of it was, he was always looking at you.” Incautious girl, the words escaped

her ere she knew, and Matilda heard them, and stopped short, although she had drawn her breath, and opened her lips to speak again.

She stopped short in her surprise.

“Looking at me !” she said, at last.

“He was, indeed. He was always looking your way, at least, and listening to what you and Mr Whewell were saying. I suppose he must have found your conversation more amusing than mine, and no doubt it was,” owned poor Juliet in her mortification. “Mr Whewell is amusing, is he not ?”

“Oh, very.”

“And pleasant ? And—and——”

“Everything.”

Miss Appleby sighed.

“Come, I have a spark of generosity in my nature,” said Lady Matilda, suddenly, “and my Juliet shall profit by it. You have told me all that was in your heart, Judy, you have hidden nothing of your discomfiture and—disgust. Never mind, never mind——” as

Juliet protested. "It is too late to draw back now, much too late; and you have done so well, it would be a pity to spoil the effect. I see the scene. I see the dauntless Juliet plodding on, and the ungrateful Challoner lifting his eyes to higher spheres. (That's me," in parenthesis.) "I am the higher sphere, my love, and it is not to be wondered at if a man of forty—he looks about forty, I should say—if he did prefer—I mean, if he would have preferred my society to that of a little lass of eighteen. Had he been twenty years younger, Juliet—oh, Juliet, you have it all before you. Juliet, Juliet, you need not envy me my poor autumnal triumph. Every year you will change your style of admirer, my dear; at present you have one kind, in another year you will have another kind—it is so long ago with me that I forget the exact ages, but they keep marching on as you march—until at my years none are left to you but a scattered remnant, here and there a susceptible

widower, or a man who has lost his first love, or a foreign diplomatist who wants an English wife to head his table, or——”

“Oh, Lady Matilda, how can you say so? You know very well——”

“Very well all that you can say, child,” with unaffected disdain. “Oh yes, I know all about it; trust me. But, Juliet, what I meant to say was this. You envy me Mr Whewell, my dear delightful Mr Whewell, and herewith I make a present of him to you. Now this is how the deed of gift shall be drawn out. He sings; well, I love music, but I fear I do not greatly care for musical people, more especially when the fit is on. Fact is, I hate ’em. So Mr Whewell shall not have the felicity of being accompanied by me in ‘Darby and Joan,’ or ‘In the gloamin’, oh, my da-ārlin’,” mimicking, “those two abominations which are no doubt the flower of his *répertoire*; he shall not be permitted to shine in them, but he shall hum his bass to Juliet’s sweetest treble,

while I, even I—hearken, O Lotta, hearken, O Marion,—I will immolate myself on the altar of——”

The door opened, and she was prevented saying Challoner's name by the entrance of Challoner himself.

CHAPTER IX.

ROBERT HAS CAUSE FOR COMPLAINT.

“ You always do too little, or too much.”

—COWPER.

THERE was nothing in the faces of any of the ladies to indicate that they had been interrupted in their conversation. Lady Matilda, even while turning round courteously to include the new-comers in the conversation, continued to address the youngest Miss Appleby—altering her topic but not her tone,—while the elder sister and Mrs Hanwell resumed the thread of a confidence that had been suspended for a moment by the last remark.

“ You see,” said Lotta, earnestly, “ I could have overlooked it if it had been the first time,

and if I could have put any faith, any real faith, in the woman's professions. But if once a servant has been untrustworthy, you don't know how to believe her again."

"Yes, indeed," replied her companion, endeavouring to look as attentive as before; "yes, indeed. I know that is what mamma always says, and——"

——"I could never have let her out of the house with any comfort, could I? And if there had been a message to be taken—and we so often have to have messages—at least errands to be run—down to the village, you know, to the post, or for things that cook wants—cooks always want things when there is no one handy to go for them——"

("I hear Lotta and her cooks," murmured Lady Matilda, aside to Teddy.)

——"If we had wanted to send anywhere, it would always have been 'Who was to go?'" proceeded the unconscious narrator. "Now Sarah has always seemed willing, and so I always let her; and it was only the other day

—though I must own I had my suspicions before—but it was only the day before yesterday, something was wanted for yesterday's dinner, something that cook had to make ready the day before, for we had these gentlemen coming" (lower), "and so, of course, cook was anxious to do her best, and she asked if Sarah might run up the road for her."

——"Don't you find the fire rather hot, dear?"

"No, thank you, never mind." Lotta's tongue was not to be stopped in that way.

"Well, Marion, I do assure you that the girl took an hour and a half, and she had not half a mile to go! She did indeed; for I looked the clock, and it was four o'clock when she went, and half-past five when she came in. It was dark, quite dark outside, but I heard her come in and go up the back-staircase, so I called out, 'Is that Sarah?' and it was."

"Oh, that was too bad. But——"

"She had only to run up the road to Farmer Dunstable's for some cream—at least, to let

them know that extra cream would be wanted next day; she had not even to wait for it, and she could not pretend that she had when I taxed her. The cream was wanted for the white soup, you know; cook does make such excellent white soup, and she is so economical over it; she never thinks of veal and chicken; she makes a bit of the neck of mutton do, with a rabbit. Of course, I let her get what cream she likes; for, after all, a shilling's worth of cream goes a long way; and Mrs Dunstable's cream is always good and thick. So when she asked if some one might be sent to the farm, I said, 'Send Sarah.' I said it at once, never thinking, never for a moment imagining, you know, that she was not to be trusted. Robert would have sent the groom, but he had hurt his foot; and as Sarah has nothing much to do about four o'clock—she never has—I suggested her myself. She brought in my cup of tea first—Robert does not take tea—and I remember that I thought it rather strange Sarah's bringing it in so early, for I don't

usually have it till five, or nearly five,—and she excused herself by saying that she thought I looked tired, and would be glad of my tea. It was that I might not find out how long she stayed, you know.”

“Dear!” said Miss Appleby, properly shocked. Resistance was of no avail; the grievance, she saw, must be heard out.

“I could hardly believe it, Marion, and, of course, I have felt it dreadfully. Nurse—I mean Mrs Burrble, not Hannah—nurse did give me a sort of hint a week ago, at least she says now that she meant it for a hint,—by the way, Mrs Burrble can stay on with us another week, Marion—is not that nice? I was so anxious that Hannah should have her in the house for a little after Hannah had begun to take baby in hand; and Robert has been so good, he says under the circumstances I am quite right, and he does not mind the expense at all. Of course she is expensive, but she is such a nice woman, and I can talk to her about all sorts of things. I told her about

Sarah at once, and then she reminded me that she had given me that hint. She had said, 'Are you keeping on Sarah, ma'am?' And she tells me now that she had meant me to notice it, and to ask why she inquired. But it never occurred to me. Now, would it to you?"

"Not for a moment."

"And I was not to blame, was I?"

"Not in the least."

"Well, it is a good thing now that it is off your mind," continued Miss Appleby, in a summing-up judicial tone; "and as you have given her warning——"

"Oh, but it is not off my mind at all. You see I did not take in what Mrs Burrble meant, when she asked, 'Are you keeping on Sarah?' What was I to say? Of course I *was* keeping on Sarah. So now Sarah says——"

"Young ladies, young ladies, where are your manners?" Never had human voice sounded more musical in the ears of the unfortunate Marion Appleby than Lady Matilda's did now.

“Fie, both of you! usurping one another in this way,” continued the hostess, with the most delightful reproach. “Fie! get up; split into two, instantly. I really wondered how long this was going on,” she proceeded, looking from one to the other as they stood up at her command, “and at last I saw something must be done. Look over there.”

Over there accordingly the culprits looked, and indeed what they beheld justified Matilda’s complaint. Lord Overton, Mr Challoner, Robert, and Teddy were all silently drinking coffee, having apparently exhausted every single thing they had to say to each other before they left the dining-room. Whewell was more lucky, but still only relatively lucky: he had the resource of the china ornaments on the mantelpiece and Juliet Appleby; but even he was less lively than before, while there was no doubt that the other quartet felt themselves, if not aggrieved, at least unwanted, unneeded, superfluous.

As soon, however, as it was seen that the

ladies were no longer too deeply engaged for intrusion, they were approached on all sides,—the two Overtons, elder and younger, with one accord addressing the ever-pliant accommodating Marion Appleby, who was always ready to listen, and never had much to say; while Mr Challoner, apparently impelled by a sense of duty, made an opening observation to Mrs Hanwell, and Matilda herself was left to her son-in-law.

Well, she could not help it; she had meant, had certainly meant, to take that opportunity for making amends to Challoner, and she would undoubtedly have preferred him, even him, to Robert; but he had begun with Lotta, and so there was an end of it. No one could say it was her fault. Still it was the hour for sacrifice, so if balked in one direction she would strike out in another; she would make the best of the bad bargain the fates had given her for the nonce; and accordingly—

“I am having new covers in my boudoir, Robert.”

“Indeed? Are the old ones worn out, then?”

“Worn to rags. But I daresay I should have had them still, if Teddy had not let fall a bottle of ink, and it went all over the sofa, cushions and all, last week. Perhaps on the whole it was the best thing he could have done.”

“You are a philosopher, Lady Matilda.” The effects of a good dinner and a pleasant after-dinner were not without their effect on Mr Hanwell; he found Lady Matilda more sensible than usual. “And what are the new covers like?” he inquired with interest.

“Really not very unlike the old ones. You may not discover any difference; I should not be surprised if they never catch your eye at all, unless you remember my having told you.”

“And why did you get them so much alike? For the sake of the rest of the furniture, I suppose? It is really an important matter when you begin to alter furniture,”—he was a

great man for furniture,—“and I suppose you had to suit your carpet and curtains? Or have you new curtains?”

“Well, yes, I have. I did not need them a bit, and I don't know why I got them, but there they are.”

“And where did you go?”

“I had patterns down from several places, but one little man in Tottenham Court Road sent by far the best. Two or three of them would have done. If you and Lotta are in want of any more things, I advise you to try there; I am sure he is cheap, and I have kept the address. Those girls want it too,” looking at the Miss Applebys.

“Are they furnishing, then?”

“They are talking of doing up their drawing-room. Between ourselves, I doubt the result; four or five people all suggesting, and scheming, and plotting, and planning—to say nothing of quarrelling and sulking over it—is too much. They will come to grief sooner or later, you may depend upon it, and already

there are rumours of dissension afloat. I fancy 'papa' does not see any reason for doing it at all; papas never do, you know."

"Exactly: they never do. My father was most unwilling to make any changes at the old house, I remember," observed Robert, sitting slowly and heavily down on a low chair beside her, (oh, heavens, this was more than she had bargained for!) "and it was some time before we could get the old gentleman to acknowledge that there was anything of the kind needed. One of the floors was actually giving way; and when the library carpet was taken up," continued he, stretching out his legs comfortably in front—"when the old green carpet was up that had been down for thirty years, I believe you could see daylight through it! Oh, there were holes in a number of the carpets."

"They were not visible holes, then," replied Lady Matilda, graciously; "invisible to me, at any rate. I saw nothing but what was the picture of comfort and—and" (again that word

‘respectable’ in her mind, and again it would not do)—“and everything. But with such good rooms,” proceeded the speaker, hastily—“with such first-rate rooms as they have at your father’s, it is easy to make them look well. I was never in a better planned house in my life.”

“Well, really” (he hardly knew what to do under such amiable treatment), “really, you—ah—you are very kind to say so. And it is tolerable in its way; not like this, of course, not to be compared to Overton; but it is certainly a good old-fashioned building, dry and wholesome. And when are you thinking of going over again, Lady Matilda? They will be most happy, you know. We propose taking baby the end of next week, and stopping over Sunday—Lotta perhaps longer; certainly they will try to keep her longer,—she is a great favourite with them all, and I may leave her for a week or so if she wishes it. I must come back myself. We begin our new stables on Monday week, and I must be on the spot while

it is being done. Besides the chance of blunders, I always make a point of being at home when the workmen are about. You never know what they may be up to. And then we have at present no very good place for keeping our silver. How do you do about your silver here? Have you a safe?"

"Yes—no. At least I don't know,—I suppose so. I never thought about it." She was not quite sure that she knew what a safe was, but had discretion enough to keep her ignorance to herself.

"Well, I have almost made up my mind to have one," proceeded Robert, "and I will tell you where I mean to place it. I have my own ideas on the subject. There is a little cupboard that opens out of the hall, pretty far back, underneath the staircase, just beyond where the coat-stand is——"

"I know—I know." Her tone meant, "Stop that, at any rate," but happily he was insensible to it.

"You know? Well, that little cupboard

is pretty well hidden, and it goes pretty far back. A safe could be fitted in at the back, and made fast either to the wall behind, or to the floor—either would do. I am not sure which would be best? Which should you say?"

"I should consult the man who comes to put it up."

"Oh, I never do that,"—he shook his head emphatically. "No, no, Lady Matilda, I know better than to do that. I have my own ideas about things, and I generally find they are correct. I do not want to boast, but really I have hardly ever—I may almost say never—had to repent when I have taken a thing into my own hands."

She sighed, but she had to endure: for fully half an hour did he run thus smoothly on; and as every one else either was, or was obliged to appear to be, equally agreeably engaged, she had no pretext for rising, and no hope of deliverance.

At length, however, came a break. One

voice dropped off after another, more than one eye was directed to her, and she could with all propriety herself respond to the general mute appeal for a change of scene.

“We were to have some music?” suggested Whewell, approaching. “May we hope, Lady Matilda——”

She rose smiling.

“Let him sing alone,” said Robert in a low voice. “He can; and he can play for himself too.” Whewell had gone to open the instrument. “I think,” continued Robert, with what was for him a great effort of moderation,—“I think, perhaps, Lady Matilda, you have not noticed that Challoner—ah—I fancy he would like if you would speak to him a little. And I think you would be pleased with him,—I really do. Quite so,—I mean if you have the opportunity,” in reply to a hesitating glance towards the piano. “I understand: it will do by-and-by—quite well, by-and-by.”

Well, she would, by-and-by. Robert had a show of reason on his side; and however dull

and uninteresting his friend might be, it was true that, for her own sake, she ought not to be rude to any one. And then Juliet had said that Challoner had been looking at her. Certainly she would do something, if it were ever so little, for him—by-and-by.

But, alas! by-and-by was long in coming. One song succeeded another, and Whewell found each more charming than the last. He did not sing with her, having found out, with his native quickness of perception, that she would prefer going her own way unmolested, and that the few notes he threw in once or twice had only resulted in confusion; he had put her out, and a thousand apologies could not put her in again. He promised in future to abstain; but to sing with him for an auditor, for an enthusiastic demonstrative auditor, was pleasant enough—so pleasant, indeed, that time drew on, and there was no appearance of an end to it.

It was not that Challoner was forgotten,—it was that she could not be troubled with

him. And, after all, why should she be? She thought—as soon as the effect of Robert's leniency had worn off a little—she thought Mr Challoner did well enough without notice. It appeared to be all one to him where he was, or what he was doing; and looking at him, as he and Overton sat together at the far end of the room, with evidently quite a fellow-feeling of comfort and repose in obscurity, she vowed it would be a pity, altogether a pity, to unsettle the minds of either.

Now Whewell was different: Whewell could not be happy unless he were in the front of everything: whatever was the order of the day, he must have a part in it, and could perform that part well; and such being the case, it was a pleasure to do anything for him. But if a man has no discernment, sees no difference, and would as soon be at the bottom as at the top—why, leave him at the bottom.

At length, however, Whewell had implored, and praised, and thanked, and flattered, until it seemed as though nothing else were left to

be said or looked. It grew late. "I believe I ought to see after people," said Matilda, rising. "Juliet, take my place; and you, who accompany so much better than I do, play this for Mr Whewell."

Thus she was free, and now surely was Challoner's time come? But no. Unfortunately no one but Matilda herself knew what Matilda meant to do, and two at least of the party were ill enough pleased with what she had already done. Neither of these was Lord Overton—he was happy enough: he thought the evening had gone off well—better than he had expected; and that as every one was doing as he or she liked best, all was right. Whewell he considered was a noisy fellow, but noisy fellows were of use sometimes, and it was lively to hear the piano going. For himself, he liked Challoner better, infinitely better; but Challoner could not help things off as Whewell did; and any way the dull dinner-party would soon be over, and he hoped Matilda would not soon think it necessary to give

another. Here was Matilda coming; and had Matilda come, had she got his length and accosted him, she would have been received with his usual smile. But an angry voice stopped her midway.

“You have come at last,” said Teddy, in her ear. “And time you did, I should say. You and Juliet have behaved nicely to the rest of us,”—for Juliet had not shown that sense of desolation which he had expected on seeing him turned into her sister’s cavalier for the evening. “She is going on with that ape, Whewell, with a vengeance. And so were you. And you treat that other one, as nice a fellow as ever lived, as if he were a dog.”

“I do nothing of the kind: I don’t know what you mean.”

“He has sat in that chair ever since we came in from dinner, and nobody has gone near him but Lotta.”

“Overton is sitting by him now.”

“What’s Overton? I don’t believe he has

said ten words since he came in. And Juliet too. Tell you what, Robert says——”

“What do I care for Robert? Let him say anything.”

“He is as savage with you as ever he can be.”

“Savage! How absurd you are!” cried Matilda, but still under her breath, though with a movement of the shoulder which carried its own emphasis. “Let Robert mind his own business. It is not for him to dictate to me; I can judge for myself, I should hope.” And not a syllable would she speak to Chaloner after that.

“The carriage is here,” said Lotta at last. “Good-bye, mamma; we must not stop a minute, as it is raining. My cloak is downstairs, thank you. It is in the library.” And the next thing was the cold touch of a limp and indignant hand, as Robert, no longer under the influence of dinner and claret, followed his wife out into the hall.

CHAPTER X.

THE REAL WOUND AND THE APPARENT ONE.

"He smarteth most who hides his smart
And sues for no compassion."

—RALEIGH.

CHALLONER had been in the background throughout the evening described in the last chapter, but he was no longer destined to remain so; he was, within a few minutes of leaving the drawing-room, to be brought as prominently before the public as would have satisfied a dozen Whewells.

The ladies were being shawled and hooded in the library, and Lotta was in the act of having her last golosh drawn on, when a noise from without made them all turn their heads, wondering aimlessly, as females do, what was the matter.

There had been the sound of a breakage, a crash and a smash : not a remarkably violent smash ; probably a lamp knocked over, or something as bad as that—annoying, but not more ; and no particular attention might have been excited, had it not been immediately followed by more than the usual bustle and disturbance.

“ I say ! ”

“ By Jove ! ”

“ Are you hurt ? ”

Then “ handkerchief ” and “ bleeding ” were indistinctly caught, and finally a whole sentence reached their ears, in Robert’s voice, but in a voice raised higher and more hurried than its wont,—“ Sticking-plaster ! I don’t believe she has such a thing in the house.”

That was enough ; all flocked out to hear and see, and Lady Matilda joined the group from the ante-room. What had happened ? Who was hurt ?

The questions were answered by a blast of cold air driving in through a broken window

of some size, and further, by the sight of Challoner standing before Whewell, who was busily engaged tying a handkerchief above his wrist, and at the same time bending down so close over it, as to show he was endeavouring to discover something, probably the extent of the damage done.

The two were underneath a circle of lamps, and blood was dripping from their hands.

“If I could only see—if I had anything to clear the wound. Water—get some water,” cried Whewell; “cold water and a sponge! Look sharp with it!” as the servants hung about uncertainly. “I can’t see anything for this infernal blood.”

“What do you want to see?” said a voice at his elbow.

“Oh, Lady Matilda! Beg pardon, but can’t you get me *something*?” replied Whewell, somewhat taken aback, although appearing to more advantage in his concern and abruptness than in any previous phase. “Can’t you get me anything to stop the bleeding? Friar’s

balsam—that's it; that's the thing I want. Oh, you have not any? Oh, what have you, then? And where is that water?" impatiently looking round. I sent them for it an hour ago. I could at least bandage the cut, if we could make sure there was no glass sticking in; but I can't see anything for this—— Oh, it's here! Here with it, then. Hold the basin under—right under, can't you? See what a devil of a mess you are making! Excuse me, Lady Matilda," in another tone,—"excuse me, but you are in my light. Now then, Challoner, off with your coat! Here, you, help him!"

"No, nonsense!" cried Challoner, resisting the footman's touch. "Thanks all the same, but there is really nothing to make a fuss about."

"Never mind that; off with his coat, I tell you! How the deuce do you suppose I am to get at the place up inside the sleeve? There, that's right. 'Jove, how it bleeds! But we'll collar it yet," sponging away. "Now, does

it hurt? Do you feel anything sharp? Any pricks?"

"Ah!" cried Challoner at the moment.

"I thought so. Yes; and a nice thing it would have been to have tied that in," rejoined Whewell, holding up a narrow strip of glass half an inch long. "D'ye see that? Eh? Why, it's better already. Hold his arm there, will you? Hold it as hard as you can, just above the elbow-joint; feel for the pulse, and dig your fingers in. Don't be afraid; dig them in as hard as ever you can. Can anybody give me a good long handkerchief? A silk one would be the best." Teddy was half-way up-stairs ere the words were well out of the speaker's mouth. "I say, bring two," shouted Whewell after him.

"You are very good, but—you make too much of it," said Challoner, with a restive motion that implied dislike to being thus the centre of attraction. "I am sorry I have broken the pane," looking at the shattered glass, which nobody had as yet attempted to

clear away ; " and every one will take cold," he added.

" Yes, to be sure. *I* am warm enough ; but it is shivery, rather," said Whewell. " If you will go back to the drawing-room for a few minutes, ladies, we shall soon be ready for you," subjoined he, concealing, if he felt it, a natural reluctance to lose his audience. " I shall manage now ; I shall just tie it up till we get back to Endhill, and then no doubt Mrs Hanwell will furnish me with plasters and balsam. You have them ? Yes ; that's right. He will do very well till then. It will not take long now, Challoner. Don't catch cold, like a good fellow, for I can't let you move yet. What's this ? Brandy ? Ah, that's the thing to keep up his fettle ! I thought he was growing a little white about the gills."

The patient laughed outright.

" You may laugh—laugh away," proceeded the extempore surgeon, with the end of a handkerchief between his teeth ; " but it's all

very fine. Drink your brandy, my friend, and be thankful. I should not mind a nip myself, if you would be so good, Lord Overton. Oh, don't go yourself—pray don't go yourself. I would not on any account. What a good fellow he is !” he added, for the benefit of those left.

Only Challoner and the footman were left ; every one else had gladly seized the opportunity to beat a retreat from the raw night-air, which continued to pour in through the broken window, since the brown paper, with which it had been proposed to patch it for the night, had not yet appeared—even Robert had retired with the rest into the drawing room, there to be interrogated and listened to.

“He was pulling down the window. The window was open, and we all felt cold. You kept us waiting so long, Lotta. I do wish, my dear, you could manage to be a little quicker sometimes. What had you to do but put on your cloak——”

“My dear Robert, I was not a minute.

But Janet had put my cloak underneath Marion's, and at first we could not distinguish which was which — these fur cloaks are all so much alike: indeed we could not see that there were two; we thought there was only one."

"Oh, never mind—never mind. How your tongue *does* run on, Lotta!" cried Lady Matilda, who never could prevent herself from speaking to her daughter as if she were still at home and unmarried. "Tell me about the accident, Robert. How could he do it? What was there in closing a window to break it all to pieces, and cut Mr Challoner's hand so badly?"

"It is unfortunately not the hand, but the wrist—just in the worst place, where the large artery is."

"But how did he do it? How did he do it?"

"How did he do it? I do not know, I am sure: I cannot imagine. I was going to draw down the window—at least Lord Over-

ton was going—and I was just going, when Challoner, who was in front of us both, turned round and did it.”

“Did it? Did what?”

“Pulled down the frame, and the cord broke, and it came down with a run.”

“Oh!”

“He says the frame had stuck,—swelled with the rain, no doubt.”

“Oh!”

“It was a pity your having no remedies handy,” proceeded Robert, beginning to recollect himself. “If we had been at End-hill——”

“I have two or three kinds of plaster,” cried Lotta, with a glance at her mother; “and we have arnica, and several things.”

“Give him the arnica when you get home, my dear,” observed Lady Matilda, drily. “Pour in a good supply. You are a very erudite person, we all know, Lotta. So Mr Challoner may be safely handed over to your care.”

“Arnica is not for an open wound, my

love," explained Robert, in a somewhat short aside. "It is poison, and should never be applied when the skin is broken; but a balsam for stopping bleeding is really, really a thing every one ought to have," continued he, more briskly. "You see this case shows——"

"He's all right now," announced Teddy, coming in. "He says it's nothing, and——"

"It was a great thing Whewell being with us," continued Robert, unwilling to lose the ear of the house. "Whewell is certainly a wonderful man. He can do anything he sets his hand to."

"He makes a lot of row about it, though."

Teddy's amendment was not uncalled for: even as they stood, there could be heard the dictatorial tones and loud laugh of the now excited and dominant guest; and grateful as they were for knowledge and skill so valuable at such a moment, perhaps no one could have asserted that a little less assumption would not have been more becoming.

However, that was neither here nor there.

Whewell had done well,—had manfully rendered services for which praise and thanks were due, and these should certainly be accorded him; while Challoner—Lady Matilda in particular was not quite sure how she must now address Challoner. She must address him somehow, of course; but could she now expect him to care for civility and attention so much overdue? Could she suppose that he was not to see that he had been passed over and neglected throughout the entire evening, or imagine that he would now be thankful for a crumb from her table, flung to him so late, and for such a reason? She could but hope he would not re-enter the drawing-room, and that a passing inquiry and expression of sympathy would be all that she would need to bestow in the hall. She would accompany the others out into the hall to give it, and—but hope was vain: the outsiders were heard approaching even as she pondered.

In they all came, Challoner first.

By common consent he had been ushered

to the front, in virtue of his misfortune ; and the eagerness, the queries, and condolences with which he was now assailed, vindicated the justice of the sentiment.

Everybody now spoke to Challoner, except the one who should have led the way ; and even Matilda had, with an effort and a blush, stepped forward to do her tardy part, when she caught the anxious stimulative eye of her son-in-law, and the demon within her rose. Robert's look said, "Yes, go, go : now is your time ; now you can make up for the past ; now you can retrieve your error : be quick, be quick !" And in answer to that "Be quick, be quick !" a rebellious voice within retorted, "I shall do nothing of the kind."

We have said Matilda was a sweet-tempered woman : but there are things that would set up the back of an angel ; and if there was one person on earth who was a proficient in saying or looking those things, it was Robert Hanwell.

Perhaps he might not have provoked everybody. His absurdities, his self-complacency, and his unconscious arrogance, would not have caused some good souls more than a faint annoyance, or they might even have derived from them a distinct source of amusement; but with such he must have had nothing to do as a relation, and they must have come but seldom into contact with him. To Matilda he was as a rough collar constantly worn: he could not be shaken off, he could not be thrown aside; he was always there, and he was always making himself felt to be there. Moreover, it is probable that in the presence of his mother-in-law the unfortunate young man showed to his worst—that he set her on, out of a spirit of opposition, to do things which she would not otherwise have done; and that he in turn, fretted and irritated by her levity, made himself yet more ridiculous by his ill-humour than she would have made him by her wit.

On the present occasion the ill-humour was more than ordinarily disastrous. Matilda was vexed with herself, and was really anxious to make honourable amends to Chalonier for her former slighting demeanour towards him. Now a finer shade of perception than Robert possessed would have enabled him to see this, and to stand back and let her now aroused and womanly compunctions have their full swing: she would, following the dictates of her own heart, have said all that was kind and gentle; she would have won forgiveness in a moment. But just as she was about to step forward, or rather had actually taken a step or two, and was hesitating for a suitable word to begin with, a pressing and perturbed countenance must needs be thrust forward, and all was lost.

Who was he, that she should do his bidding? "Know your place, sir," was written in every line of the frown which gathered on her brow, and she turned on her heel—to find Whewell at her side.

“We shall be off immediately now, Lady Matilda. The carriage had been sent round to the stables, but it will be here in a minute. Pray forgive Mr Challoner: he would never have forgiven himself, I assure you, if he had bled to death in your hall.”

“It was not so bad as that, I hope.” Lady Matilda responded to the light tone so coldly that the speaker looked surprised.

“You have no doctor near at hand, I am told?” rejoined Whewell, leaving banter alone, as he perceived it to be inappropriate.

“Within two miles—within a mile and a half, I should say. That is pretty well for a country place, I think. We have no great need of doctors in Overton parish. If Mr Challoner needs a doctor——”

“Oh, not a bit of him; not now, at all events. These bull-dog kind of men can stand anything; and this was merely—— Oh, Mrs Hanwell is going. Good night, then, Lady Matilda; we shall see you in church to-morrow. And pray remember

that you have promised to coach me up in my new duties; I look to you to pull me through. Good night. Where," looking round—"where is my patient?"

He was behind, awaiting his turn; and he was unsupported, or rather his parting moments were uninjured by Robert. Robert had gone out with the Miss Applebys, who had stayed with the rest, no one knew why, and they were now being escorted to the door by him and Teddy. Lord Overton was, as usual, doing nothing, and visible nowhere. "Mr Challoner," said Matilda, very gently, "I cannot express to you how sorry I am."

She wished she could have said more, wished she could have thought of more to say; but no civility, no condolence, no repentance would furnish her with a single other word at the moment; and before she could make a second attempt, or conjure up any further pretext for detaining him, he was gone. Matilda uneasily followed. What could she do? Was there anything left for

her to do? She was cudgelling her brains as she wandered on with a vague idea of being friendly in not being left behind, when anew there seemed to be a stir without, and it was Robert's voice which, as before, was the presager of evil.

"Going to walk to the village, Challoner! To *walk*! What for? I thought I understood——"

Then a murmur of undertones; then Overton's voice—"I can send at once. I should have done so before."

"Why, I'll go." That was Teddy.

Matilda lost not another moment. "What is wrong? What is the matter?" she cried, with a sound almost of terror in her tones: for long years afterwards she remembered that moment, as she had cause to remember it.

"Well, it is hard to say: really I do not know what to advise," replied Whewell, who, with the others, was standing on the doorstep, in front of the brougham, in which Mrs Hanwell was already seated. "Of course, if

Challoner thinks the bleeding is still going on, he ought to have it seen to at once. I am very sorry; I had hoped we had settled it. But certainly Challoner is right to speak out; and as you say we are going away from a doctor—that is actually in an opposite direction—— Is there no way round?" he broke off suddenly; "could we not drive round?"

"I shall walk, and be there in no time," announced Challoner with gruff decision. "Can you give me a latch-key, Hanwell? That is all I want."

"Eight miles at the end of a long day's shooting!" cried the master of Endhill.

"My dear fellow, eight miles; what are eight miles?" And Robert found himself almost pushed into the carriage. "There—it's all right; don't keep Mrs Hanwell waiting."

"I can't allow it. Certainly you shall not go alone."

"Suppose I go with him," said Whewell, faintly.

There were further suggestions and assertions, and at length, "Suppose there are two fools instead of one, and suppose here's a third to bear them company, and I'm he," cried Teddy in the rear. "What a lark! Just wait till I get my boots on."

"You need not trouble; George is off by this time on the bay mare," said the quiet voice that was always listened to. "And," continued Lord Overton, "Mr Challoner must be good enough to accept a bed here for to-night; he will be attended to much sooner here than at Endhill, and it will save the doctor, and the doctor's nag, a long journey into the bargain."

When had Overton done it? How had he managed it?

He had not appeared on the scene at all; and although as a host he had been polite, and as a man concerned, he had only so far entered into the spirit of the thing: now all were surprised, and though relief was painted on the faces of Whewell and Hanwell, the discom-

future of the other two gentlemen was obvious. Challoner looked, and could not keep from looking annoyed, and Teddy refused to stop equipping himself: now that he was started, he must do something and go somewhere, and eagerly burst forth with a dozen plans.

“Do whatever you like,” said his brother. “Take a walk in the rain if it pleases you—it will do no one any harm; but Mr Challoner remains here,” laying a detaining hand on Challoner’s arm. “All right, coachman! Look you up in the morning, Robert;” and against so wise and comfortable a conclusion no one could protest.

Terrible had been the internal qualm which had been experienced by Whewell as well as by Robert when Challoner’s first proposal had been made.

Even the lesser evil of having to drive their patient to the village and back, before again getting into the road for Endhill—a clear two miles, if not three miles, extra—had been appalling; and yet, but for Lord Overton’s

promptitude, this must have been the end of it. They could not be thankful enough.

“Uncle Overton is so kind and thoughtful, once he really understands about things,” observed Lotta. “He does not often bestir himself, but when he does—— I am so glad you had not to take that dreadful walk, either of you ; I assure you I am.”

So were they.

“And where would have been the good?” proceeded the lady, astutely ; “Mr Challoner must have gone all the same. It would have been no use for any one of you to have gone without Mr Challoner ; and if he *had* to go, and no one else *had* to go——however, I am glad he had not to go, either : uncle Overton settled it in much the best way.” And in every aching joint and weary muscle, the other two felt that she was answered in the affirmative, and found no flaw in the argument.

“Come and sit down,” said Lord Overton, gently pushing his reluctant guest back into the deserted drawing-room once more. “Ma-

tilda, don't you sit up unless you like. Chal-loner,—why, Challoner," with a sudden cry, "why, it's *pouring*! Good heaven! what shall we do?"

"This," said Matilda.

Her face had paled, but it was not the pallor of inertion; in a second she had with her own hands and Teddy's help torn off Chal-loner's coat, and sprung upon his arm, feeling for the pulse above the elbow-joint, as before indicated by Whewell,—holding it, when found, with the grip of a wild cat.

"What are you doing?" said Overton, in a low voice. Poor fellow, he was frightened now.

"She is doing me a service," replied Chal-loner for her; "Lady Matilda is pressing her fingers into the vein to stop the circulation, and if she can only hold on——"

"I can—I shall."

"It is indeed kind;" but the speaker did not proceed. It *was* kind—no one could say it was not kind; but it was annoying and

vexatious that he should need such kindness. It was difficult to know what to say, where complaints would have been ungracious, but where too much gratitude would have been absurd. The situation had been forced upon his entertainers: nothing had been voluntary on their part, and this no one could have felt more keenly than the recipient, the Challoner who had sat silent and still, left to himself the whole evening, uncared for and unnoticed. To be sure, Overton had drawn his chair up a few yards off, and Overton had been equally at leisure; but there the good-fellowship for the nonce had ended, while neither Teddy nor Matilda had done for him a thing. To have Teddy now passionately pacing up and down the room on his account! To have Matilda kneeling by his side!

He bit his lip, and quiet man as he was, almost cursed the situation in his heart.

However, there the situation was, and nothing could improve it: and ages indeed it seemed before the sharp imperative summons

of the door-bell announced the welcome arrival—come, indeed, as soon as any reasonable mortals could have expected, and as fast as Dr Hitchin's horse could go ; and all that weary while Matilda knelt bravely on, never changing her position, nor relaxing her hold, but taking no part in the brief dialogues that from time to time were interchanged among the other three, and only now and then drawing unconsciously a long deep breath, and stealing a furtive glance at the clock.

CHAPTER XI.

CHALLONER IS IMPATIENT TO BE GONE.

“The latent mischief from his heart to tear.”

—PRIOR.

UNDER the skilful treatment of the village apothecary, a man of high repute in his own sphere, and renowned for many a long-winded diagnosis, Challoner's wound soon assumed a less serious aspect.

But another difficulty now arose. He was ordered to bed—not to bed for the night, as was reasonable enough, and agreeable enough to his inclinations, but to stay in bed until seen and interviewed the next day; and this could only be hearkened to with ridicule and impatient contempt. But what, then, was the dismay of the scoffer, and the delight and im-

portance of our friend Teddy, when the command that had been thus wantonly maltreated when it issued from Dr Hitchin's lips, had to be obeyed from very stress of adverse circumstances ! The next morning found Challoner hot and cold, coughing and shivering, and although still unwilling to own as much, by no means so obdurate as the night before. He would at least lie still for an hour or two : he had—yes, he certainly had taken a little chill ; and perhaps, as the day was wet, and nothing could be done out of doors, being Sunday, he might as well submit to be coddled up, so as to be all right on Monday.

But Monday came, and he was by no means all right ; throat and chest were sore, his head was aching, and he sneezed in the doctor's face even while making solemn declaration of his innocence. The truth was, that scarcely any living man could have escaped scot-free who had done what Challoner had done : he had stood—and without his coat, be it remembered—full in the icy current let in by the

broken window for upwards of twenty minutes, while Whewell attended to his hand and wrist; and he had just come out of a well-warmed room, a rather over-warm room, into which no draught ever by any chance penetrated, and he had lost some blood. He could hardly have been human, and not have caught cold; and this was precisely what he had done.

He had caught cold—nothing more; but nothing more was needed. The cold had attacked both throat and chest, and there was no doubt about it. To get up and take his departure was not to be thought of; he must give in, stop where he was, and play the invalid.

A more reluctant or pugnacious invalid Dr Hitchin had never before had to deal with.

What! stay on at Overton, and on and on at Overton, and that not for two days or three days, but “till he was better,”—horrible indefinite term!—obtrude himself in a manner so unseemly on strangers, utter strangers, and demand and wrench from them, as it were, their sympathy and their hospitality? Not

he. It could not be done. The doctor must understand, once for all, that he, the patient, had got to be made well somehow in another day or so,—well enough, at any rate, to leave the Hall, and no longer trouble people upon whom he had no sort of claim, and to whose house he had merely come to dine by chance.

“Bless my life, surely it was a lucky chance then!” cried the amazed Hitchin in his heart. “One would think these were snug enough quarters for any dainty fellow to be laid up in: everything he can possibly want; fine old place, fine company—a nice amusing idle young fellow like Teddy, and the Earl is not half so black as he’s painted. Ay, and Lady Matilda. And—Lady—Matilda,” proceeded the old gentleman slowly. “Ah dear! times are changed with the young folks nowadays. What would I not have given twenty years ago for the chance of being nursed up and looked after by a Lady Matilda! A fine woman, a fine stately beauty of the rare old type—not the trumpery pretty miss, with a

turned-up nose and freckles, who passes as a belle in these times. Lady Matilda *never* looks amiss; I have never seen her look amiss, at any rate, and I meet her out and about in all sorts of winds, and in all sorts of old clothes. What would the man have? What does it all mean? I can't enter his room, but he begins with his 'When shall I be up, doctor? Can't I go away to-morrow, doctor?'—plaguering my life out, and running, certainly running a very decided risk, by thus fretting and irritating the mucous membrane into the bargain. What is he up to, that Challoner?" suddenly cried the little sage, knitting his wiry brows; "he is either a deep one and has his own reasons—— Aha! Is it Lady Matilda after all, I wonder?"

But he kept a tight hand on the patient all the same.

Now we would not for a moment cast a slur on Hitchin, and it is not to be supposed that in the few remarks we feel called upon to make below, that we infer he was biassed

by certain considerations in his view of the case—that he made the worst of the accident, and the most of his opportunity; but it ought to be borne in mind that, as a medical man—as *the* medical man of the neighbourhood, the sole physician, accoucheur, surgeon, and apothecary of anywhere about short of Seaburgh itself—he had been hardly used by the Overtons. Lady Matilda was never ill, neither were her brothers. Their rude health and hardihood braved every kind of weather, and laughed at every sort of disease; they were by circumstances placed above the reach of almost every form of infection; they could not be accused, even by their dearest friends, of overtasking their brains; and they did not know what nerves were. His only chance lay in an accident; and so far, accidents had been few and far between.

“Yet,” pondered he, “they ride the most dangerous animals going.” But then Dr Hitchin’s ideas of a dangerous animal differed from those of Teddy and Matilda.

However, one thing was certain, that scarcely ever since the good doctor had established himself in those parts, had he been called in to attend any one at the Hall; and indeed, on the rare occasions when this privilege had been accorded him, and he and his Bobby had had the felicity of turning in at the avenue gate, it had been invariably on the behoof of a housemaid or kitchenmaid whose ailment did not even necessitate his drawing rein at the front door. Even Lotta had got through her full share of childish complaints before his day, and nothing had remained for him but the dregs of the whooping-cough, which dregs had done him no credit, and given him considerable trouble.

He had not soon been summoned again; and indeed it was now several years since he had even been within the park, farther than to skirt along the high slope above the house, where was a road free to all, and used as a short cut by any one who chose.

All of this being thus explained, and it

being also understood that Dr Hitchin knew tolerably well all the outs and ins of the family, and had, in common with the rest of the little world about, studied their ways and humours for a considerable length of time, the judicious reader will at once be able, according to the charity that in him—or her—lies, to determine how ill Challoner really was.

Very ill he was not, or he would have been more meek. And he was not meek—not by any means. True, he said but little, and gave utterance to not a syllable of complaint, but his air was restive and disdainful; he received instructions and prescriptions with a smile that was worse than words; and though he did not actually dare to disobey orders, though he put out his tongue when told, and even submitted to the indignity of having a glass tube thrust under it, and having to sit still with the ridiculous thing sticking out of his grave mouth for two full minutes, he did it all with what at least was

no enthusiasm, and received the report of his stomach, his pulse, and his temperature as if they had severally belonged to some one else.

Such apathy was almost too much even for the cheerful little doctor; but there was one person whom it suited to a nicety—one member of the household who got on better with Challoner than he had ever done with any mortal in his life before—and that was Lord Overton.

Overton had found a man who could hold his tongue, and yet be happy.

He had at last by good hap hit upon a fellow-creature who would sit as still, smoke as long, and say as little as he did himself; he had at length met with some one who paid him no court, gave him no trouble, put forth no efforts for his amusement, no solicitude for his comfort, and who expected, in return for all this forbearance, this priceless moderation, simply nothing. When he had said his “Good morning,” and “Hope you’re better?” each day, he could sit down just where he

liked, in the worst chair and the worst part of the room if he chose, and Challoner would barely turn his head to see where he was or what he was doing. He would pull out his own cigar; he would hunt up his own match, and pass it on, no one resenting his rising and moving to do so; he would poke the fire—Robert Hanwell would have had his hair standing on end had he witnessed the indifference with which Challoner permitted his distinguished companion to handle his own poker and tongs, once he found that Overton liked doing so,—he would sit on and on in peace and comfort, no one thinking it necessary to trouble with talking beyond a “Beastly wet,” now and then varied, perchance, with a “Bad for the farmers,”—each of which remarks, if originated by himself, would merely draw from the other an inarticulate civil sound, which was perfectly polite and pleasant, but which most men would have thought was hardly response sufficient for Lord Overton. Perhaps Challoner would volunteer the

“Beastly wet,” and Overton would nod the mute assent; perhaps they would both together originate the sentiment; perhaps one would see that the weather was about to improve, and the sky to clear, while the other considered that the rain was setting steadily in; perhaps one would narrate a brief, a very brief experience of country life, farmers shooting, or proprietary grievances; perhaps the other would cap the story with a better,—but however long they bore each other company, and whatever they agreed upon or differed upon, one thing was plain, they were on the best of terms.

Lady Matilda jested about the strange pair who, thus thrown at haphazard together, fitted like a pair of gloves; and my lord’s predilection for Mr Challoner, and the length of time my lord passed in the sick-room, made the invalid’s beef-tea several degrees stronger and more grateful to the palate than it would have been had Mr Edward only been there to see.

Nobody told Lord Overton a word of Chal-

loner's impatience to be at liberty—naturally nobody would; and indeed the principal person who could, was the least likely of all to whisper a hint of the kind, since Dr Hitchin knew better than to breed mischief at any time, especially such mischief as must have been detrimental to his own interests.

Greatly was he pleased with the alliance between the two odd-come-shorts. (It was Matilda who styled them the odd-come-shorts, and who stuck to the term in spite of Teddy's representation that whatever might be said of Overton, it was rough on Challoner to be bracketed with him, without being given a chance of showing what he was or what he could be.)

Lady Matilda openly smiled in the doctor's face when he announced that Lord Overton was excellent company for Mr Challoner. She was quite willing that he should be, more than willing—charmed, delighted; but it showed her one thing—namely this, that any one who could be thus enamoured of her

dear excellent elder brother's dumb show of good-fellowship could be of no earthly good to *her*: she must look elsewhere for a kindred spirit.

At length Dr Hitchin suffered himself to be persuaded into a decree that his patient might be moved into another room,—into the drawing-room, or still better, into the sunny little boudoir—Lady Matilda's boudoir—which was on the same floor, and had a southern aspect.

No going up and down stairs at first, no draughts, no chills. “You just go to Lady Matilda's room by-and-by, when the windows are shut, and there is a good fire—that is to say, if her ladyship will be good enough to grant permission,” with a little bow and wave of the hand to Teddy, who was supposed to represent his sister at any time she might be apart from him. “Ask Lady Matilda——”

Challoner lifted his head, as though about to speak.

——“My compliments to Lady Matilda,” proceeded the good doctor, not noticing this,

“and will she be charitable enough—eh? is that the phrase, eh?” smiling jovially,—
“charitable enough to harbour this poor patient of mine for a few hours in her delightful haven of refuge, eh, sir? Hum, eh? Haven of refuge, eh? You will have drifted into as snug a haven of refuge as ever mariner did if you get taken in there, Mr Challoner, I can assure you. Ha! ha! ha! Good anchorage for any man. I remember the room well,” suddenly resuming a matter-of-fact tone, as the two unresponsive faces before him showed no appreciation of his slyness,—
“I remember its aspect, and recommending it for Miss Lotta—Mrs Hanwell—after her severe attack of whooping-cough. She could not throw off the cough, and I was obliged to keep her almost entirely to her mother’s boudoir. It was a charming convalescent home—convalescent home, I called it then, to amuse the little girl—and it appears it must do duty for a convalescent home once more, Mr Challoner. You will find it most

comfortable : ladies always contrive to make a home comfortable ; their little odds and ends, work-baskets, and knick-knacks, are all additions in their way. Lady Matilda must find you something to do, my good sir ; you are tired of being idle, and that is what makes you fancy yourself so ill——”

“ ——*I!* I fancy myself ill ! ”

“ Well, yes ; you have felt yourself uncommonly ill, no doubt,” replied the shameless doctor, coolly ; “ very miserable, and feverish, and low, and that was the cause of your restless desire to get away from the Hall. Oh, I understood it all ; you thought you were regularly in for it, and as you did not mean to lie up, you would fain have set off through fog and rain to travel all over the country, until you had developed a thorough-paced fever. That was what you were up to. Oh, don’t tell me—I know, I know ; and let me tell *you*, my friend, that you had your desire as nearly as ever man had. I would not alarm any one at the time, but it has

been a close shave—a very close shave; a little more would have done it—just as much more,” turning to Teddy, “as Mr Challoner wanted to do. Ah, young men, young men!”

“Pooh!” said Challoner; but two things in the last speech softened his contempt. He liked—who does not?—to have it thought he had been ill; also he liked being called a young man.

He was not a very young man—he was just at the age when a man may be young or not; but Dr Hitchin, who revered muscle and sinew, height and breadth, a deep chest and a long arm, honestly looked his admiration, and could not comprehend the gleam of satisfaction which stole athwart Challoner's brow, where already a dash of grey had mingled with the thick dark locks on the temple.

“Pooh!” said the poor fellow, but he smiled—for almost the first time that day he smiled; something in his own thoughts had pleased him as Hitchin spoke.

“No disrespect to Lord Overton or Mr Edward here,” proceeded the doctor presently ; “but you will be glad to vary your society a little. Lady Matilda—(what the mischief is the meaning of this now ?” internally. “No sooner do I mention Lady Matilda than my gentleman looks black as thunder at me. Her ladyship been snubbing him, eh ? Can that be it, I wonder ?) And, Mr Edward, get out a game of chess, or draughts, or something,” he continued aloud ; “backgammon, eh ? or——”

“Penny Nap,” cried Teddy, joyously.

“Cards ? Ah, very good — very good. Anything to amuse the mind. We used to play cribbage in my young days.”

“Matilda likes cribbage. I have to play with her ; it’s awfully slow, for she always beats me,” said Teddy, with more interest than he had before displayed in the conversation. “I hate the counting, for she always manages to bag something from me, with all those ‘fifteen twos’ and rot. How is a fellow

to remember that nine and six make fifteen, as well as seven and eight ?”

“Are you fond of whist ?” It was a great moment for Hitchin. Whist was his strong point, and to make a fourth in a rubber at the Hall, or even to play with a dummy—for Lady Matilda was probably no great hand—would have been——

“No, I hate it,” said Teddy, flatly.

CHAPTER XII.

TEDDY'S CONFIDENCES.

"Each man has a measure of his own for everything."

—LAVATER.

"For fools will prate ; and though they want the wit

To find close faults, yet open blots they hit."

—DRYDEN.

HOPE was over in a moment, killed in the birth, or rather it might have been almost said to have been still-born, so few were its flickeringseconds of existence. No whist-table in the library at the Hall, no Lord Overton for a partner, no reminiscences of the same on the morrow's rounds—it had been but a passing vision, gone like a flash, and now there was again only the useful Challoner to fall back upon.

"There must not be too much talking, remember," Hitchin sighed, all doctor again.

"The bronchial tubes are still tender, and must not be excited. Talking irritates——"

"You need not be afraid of *his* talking," said Teddy, bluntly; "he must talk in his sleep if he talks at all. At any rate, he never favours me; Overton is the only person who gets any change out of him, and a little goes a long way with Overton. He ain't particular."

But the hand that fell on Challoner's shoulder was so hearty and kindly, and the charge was so freely and confidingly laid, that no one could have taken umbrage at it, and no one did. It was impossible not to like Teddy Lessingham when Teddy was good; and when he was not, why, then Matilda argued it was "only Teddy," only her poor, beautiful, whimsical—she would not for the world have whispered "half-witted"—brother. He was, she would have maintained, perfectly sensible, perfectly rational, perfectly all that he should have been, when he was not vexed or sullen; it was only when thwarted or distressed, when he did not understand, and took things amiss,

and was grieved and indignant, that Teddy was irresponsible: it was other people who roused the evil spirit in him; Teddy, let alone, would not have hurt a fly.

And Teddy now quite looked upon himself as Challoner's friend. Overton was all very well, but Overton went for nothing beside two men of the world such as himself and Challoner: it was to him that Challoner must look for everything that could make his enforced stay at the Hall endurable; and accordingly, "Well, now," cried he, as the doctor left the room—"now, you see, there you are! I said you would be all right in a few days if you would only hold on; and so you *are* all right—right as a trivet; and it is just a week to-day since—since last Saturday. This is Saturday again, you know. I daresay you didn't know, for there was nothing to tell you, unless it was the newspaper, and *that* says Friday, for to-day's has not come yet, though the afternoon post will be here directly. I say, will you go to Matilda's now, or after a bit?"

“ Oh, wait a little,” said Challoner, slowly.

“ All right. But I'll tell her that you are coming, and that she is to have a good fire, and all the rest of it : I can just run along now.”

“ Oh—ah—don't be in a hurry,” said Challoner, with an evident wish to detain the steps which had already begun to move to the door.

“ Is there not—any other room ? ” he began, hesitatingly.

“ Oh, by Jove ! when you heard what Hitchin said, and all the dust he raised about it ! Oh, I say, that's too bad. There's the billiard-room, of course, but it would be as much as my place is worth——no, no, I never disobey orders ; if I did, Matilda would give it me—that she would, I can tell you.”

“ But—we shall disturb her, shan't we ? ”

“ Not a bit. Disturb Matilda ! She is never disturbed. What has she got to be disturbed about ? Lotta was the one who used to complain of being ‘ disturbed.’ I am sure I don't know why, no one ever wanted to disturb *her* ; she might have been let alone

from morning to night, for all the good she was to anybody."

"I am such a nuisance." And something else was added indistinctly.

"Oh, come, I like that," said Teddy. "When I have told you over and over again what a perfect godsend you are to us all, and me particularly! For I never have anybody hardly—I mean any young fellows like myself. I don't know how it is, I am sure," with Teddy's puzzled look, that always made Matilda change the subject,—“I don't know how I don't have more fellows about. I had lots of friends once—I mean I have now, any number; but they don't come here. We don't ask them here; we forget, I suppose. A fellow can't be expected to remember everything, you know,” he concluded, with his usual apology.

"No, of course not," said Challoner, dreamily. He had been thinking his own thoughts, and they had been of a nature to make him say "No" or "Yes" at random to any sudden call. He had added "of course not" from

mere absence of mind ; and as it appeared to suit the requirements of the case, he again relapsed into silence, and his companion again resumed : “Overton is as fond of you as he can be ; and we were saying only this morning what a grand thing it was that Robert had not carried you off to Endhill, as he had all but done, and had you ill there. How you would have hated it ! Oh, you don’t know how you would have hated it !” cried Teddy from his heart. “You would have had nobody but Robert and Whewell. Whewell would not have done much for you. He is a selfish beggar ; I can see he is. I don’t like him a bit. He made me kneel on the cold bit of pavement, when I had to be godfather—I mean proxy godfather, or whatever it is—at the christening, and he had a nice piece of carpet. It was my carpet by rights, but he edged on to it, and I had to go on to the horrid cold stone. It was just like him : I knew he was that kind of fellow the moment

I set eyes upon him. Then he comes here dangling after Matilda!"

"Does he?" said Challoner, and suddenly looked as though expecting more.

"Doesn't he, that's all! Every day this week but one, and to-day,—and he'll be over to-day yet. It's only four now; he'll be here about five. He has been, let me see—he did not come one day; that was Wednesday, and that was because we went there, so that ought not to count; and it is as if he had been every day, every single day, this week."

"But he has only been twice up to see me."

"Very likely—up to see you. The first two times he would not disturb you—not for the world, as the doctor said you were to be quiet,—Hitchin did say so, you know, though I don't believe Whewell knew it; and then Wednesday—that was the 'bye': and then yesterday and the day before he was up both times. Well, but just fancy what it would

have been for you to have been ill at Endhill," he started off on another tack; "just think now. We should have come over to inquire after you, of course,—most likely we should have come over every day, as we have nothing else to do at present,—and of course we, at least I, should have come up and sat up with you a bit; but still it would have been different. And then all the rest of the time you would have had only Robert—only Robert," in a voice whose cadence spoke volumes. "And there you would have been, and we here,—and we who would have been so thankful of you——"

——"It is really—you are too good," said Challoner, with a sudden movement. "Go on," he added, in rather a low voice. "What were you saying?"

"I am sure I don't know. Oh, how glad we are you are here! We should have been fit to hang ourselves these five dripping days if it hadn't been for you; for though we get on as well as most people in the wet—we

don't mind it much, you know—still it is nasty to get rained through and through every day, and never to meet anybody out but ourselves,” said Teddy, lucidly if ungrammatically. “Matilda is the worst off; but then, if she likes Whewell, she is welcome to him. All the same,” he added, after a few minutes’ reflection, “I do think she has had enough of him by this time. She cut out at the back door like anything when she caught sight of him coming up the avenue yesterday; and that was how you had so much of his company: by the way, he was hanging on till she came in, and she never came. It was rather a joke, that.”

“He has no business to come over bothering us,” he broke out, presently. “We don’t want him: he is not *our* friend; he did not come on *our* invitation——”

“——Neither did I,” said Challoner, with rather a bitter smile.

“You! Oh! Oh, that’s too bad of you!” cried poor Teddy, reddening in his anxiety to

retrieve so obvious an error. "Well, anyway you *are* our friend now,—at least if you will be friends with us," he added, in his best and nicest manner. "People don't seem to care much to be friends with Overton and me," oblivious of the numbers he had just before boasted; "they don't take to us much, I am afraid. But we are not so bad at all when you get to know us. At least *I* am not so bad," said Teddy, very simply. "Overton," with warmth,—“Overton is as good a fellow as ever lived; and so is Matilda.”

“She is—what?”

“Never mind; don't catch one up, I say. I only meant to tell you that you need not be afraid of her. People are afraid of her, you know; they say she is spiteful, and that. It is the greatest lie. There's no spitefulness in her; she only lets her tongue run on a bit. Overton and I are always telling her of it; but we can't help laughing, she does take people off so jolly well sometimes. She means no harm: she is awfully good to you when she

likes you. She can't like everybody ; she is too clever to like everybody—that's the worst of her ; and there are people, you know—— She says Robert sets her teeth on edge," he broke off suddenly.

Challoner laughed.

"Ah, but it's true," proceeded the naughty boy, quite aware that he was telling tales ; "he is such a fool, he never knows when he is in a hole, and goes on and on till she can't stand more. Then she lets out on him ; how can she help it ? It is his fault ; he ought to keep out of her way."

"But he cannot always keep out of her way."

"Oh yes, he could. Why not ? Nobody wants him."

"That may be, but still——"

"Oh, I know what you mean : it is what she says herself ; she has got to put up with him for Lotta's sake. Women are so soft, you know. You would not think Matilda was soft like that, but she is. It is queer, but she does

not mind Lotta half so much as Robert. Now *I* think there is six to one and half-a-dozen to the other. Lotta is as like all the Wilmots as she can be ; they have all those flat faces and sleepy eyes. You would never dream she was Matilda's daughter, would you ? Matilda is like us," said Teddy, looking very handsome and conscious.

"She is."

"You see it ?"

"Like you ? Yes."

"But not like Overton ?"

"Not in the least like Lord Overton."

"I wonder what you think of Matilda," said Teddy, after a pause, and several wistful glances. "I am afraid she behaved very badly to you the other night. I am sure I don't know — that is to say — you see, it was all a bit of temper," proceeded he, in the humour to be chatty and confidential, for the hour was seductive, the sick-room warm and bright, the day without dark and dismal, and moreover, he had just come in from a long

wet ride, had changed his things, and got comfortable again; and with his arm-chair on one side of the fireplace, and Challoner's on the other, to be cosy and communicative seemed quite the right thing.

"It was only Matilda's way of showing fight because Robert gave himself airs. Of course it was not fair; but then women never do fight fair, and there's no driving the notion into their heads. When Matilda wants to serve Robert out somehow, she don't care a hang how; and so, because Robert looked daggers at her for not taking more notice of you before—oh, you know what I mean," a little uneasy, now that he got so far, and no helping hand was held out to draw him to land, as was sure to be the case if Matilda were by and saw him in difficulties. "You know well enough my sister was stiff, and cold, and—and infernally disagreeable to you, both at Endhill and when you dined here; at any rate, here. At Endhill, of course, she had nothing to do with you; but then, of course,

she should have had, and she would have had too, if she had chosen. But it was the night you all came over, that she was the worst. I was quite ashamed ; it seemed so inhospitable altogether. And how were you to know ? It was not meant for *you* at all ; it would have been the same whoever had come—I mean she would have been the same to any friend of Robert's—that's to say—well, of course, there was Whewell," he murmured, and his voice fell.

"I have nothing to complain of, I am sure," replied Challoner, with the courtesy of a Grandison, but with something also of the coldness. "Lady Matilda has surely a right to choose whom she will honour by her——"

"——Oh, fiddlesticks ! Honour ! There was no honour about it. Whewell got her ear, and so she let him talk on ; and if Robert had taken no notice, she would have been as sick of him then as she is now, but Robert's putting in his oar just did all the mischief. When Robert tries to force Matilda to do a

thing—no matter whether she wants to do it or not—it is just as if she had put out her two fore-feet like our donkey mare, and she'd stand still till Christmas before she'd budge a step."

"Your sister——" said Challoner, and then stopped. He had not relaxed a line in his face, nor made as though he heard the simile so little flattering and so truly fraternal. "Your sister——" he said; then began again—"I owe Lady Matilda a great debt of gratitude for her kindness and patience the other night. Probably she did me a valuable service, and I am sure it was neither an easy nor an agreeable one."

"Oh — ah — yes. Yes, of course. I had forgotten Matilda held your arm. But any one could have done that. However, she meant it for civility, no doubt; and that just shows how right I was about it all. Robert and Lotta had gone home by that time, you see. They had taken themselves off before we went back to the drawing-room; and so,

when there was no one there to see, and your hand was bad again, Matilda was glad enough to be of use. Oh, I know she was: she is awfully good if people are ill, or hurt, or anything; but she wouldn't have touched you with a hot poker if Robert had been by—I can tell you that, Challoner.”

Again Challoner laughed aloud: he began to find Teddy Lessingham downright amusing.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHEWELL ENCROACHES.

“ They that are rich in words must needs discover
They are but poor in that which makes a lover.”

—RALEIGH.

WITHOUT any suspicion of the base revelations that were thus being made within a few feet of her own door, Matilda sat awaiting her brother's return from the sick-room, whither she had seen him turn in an hour before, and from which he seemed in no hurry to emerge.

Matilda was not in her usual spirits.

She was a little uneasy, a little anxious and remorseful, and in consequence just a little cross. Whewell had been rather much for her. She had laid her little hands upon him—had laid them for a moment; had meant to

trifle away a sunny hour, and no more,—and he had seized the moment in grim earnest, and expected the hour to expand into a lifetime. He had encroached; he had—yes, he certainly had shown desire for more than had ever been intended, more than he would ever get. If he could only have been content to have taken the welcome accorded him as he ought to have taken it—to have enjoyed Lord Overton's hospitality, shot his pheasants, admired his sister, and then respectfully made his bow, and taken himself off,—how much better it would have been! But here he was still, and every day lessened his charms.

He would not remain at Endhill, although it was to Endhill alone he had been first invited. Endhill now found no favour in his eyes: he would appear and reappear at Overton; morning, noon, and night at Overton—one excuse or other serving his turn as it offered; but always expecting to be met with open arms, to be made much of, entertained, asked, and pressed to stay on,—and never, as

it seemed, for an instant suspecting that it would have been better to stay away.

Lady Matilda's own sitting-room had not been safe from his intrusion since she had imprudently laid its existence bare to him on the first occasion of his looking in for an afternoon call. He had not begun to lose caste then, and she had little dreamed how soon he would do so, even when he had vowed, with delighted eyes, that he would know the way back thither. Too speedily had he made use of his knowledge: the very next afternoon had seen him tapping at the door; and such precipitation had even then made her vexed with herself, while she had repented more and more when Monday's and Tuesday's visits had been followed by Thursday's and Friday's, and Wednesday had only been a "bye" because the brother and sister had been at Endhill.

Now Matilda would not have had any one know it for the world, but the real reason of their going to Endhill—the real object which

had taken them thither—had been to put a stop to Whewell's notion that he was to be at Overton every day of the week.

He had been known to be going shooting, and to be going shooting near the Hall,—quite close up to the house, in fact; and as such an arrangement infallibly meant that he must be asked, or ought to be asked in, or that he would come in without asking, Matilda, quick as thought, had taken occasion when the plans were being made, and when Whewell himself was standing at her elbow, to send a message to her daughter through Robert, the only other person present, to the effect that she would ride over to the cottage in the course of the afternoon. She had even done more—she had added, somewhat emphatically, a playful codicil, announcing that her visit was to her grandson, and that she therefore hoped the grandson would be visible, and would be glad to see his dear grandmother. Alas! some one else had been also visible, and very glad to see the dear grandmother. Whewell had

noted the riders pass, and had left his sport on the instant to fly at the higher game; and this from a sportsman was enough: he could not more effectually have shown his hand.

He had meant to show it: it had seemed to him time to show it; for the bold barrister had done more than merely fall in love with Lady Matilda, enough as that might have seemed for a four days' acquaintance,—he had fully made up his mind to become her suitor—and more, her husband. He had thought it all over; the birth and the jointure, as well as the beauty and the wit; and this was the result: he felt himself to be a lucky man—a very lucky man.

It would have been well for him to have looked into his luck a little more closely; it would have saved him much disappointment, a little pain, and a lifelong bitterness,—and it would have saved Lotta a week's heavy house-books. For, with so fair a prize to win, and so much depending on the use he

made of his present opportunity, it was not to be expected that Whewell should be in a hurry to go, even though the entreaties of host and hostess waned in urgency, and though the courses at dinner were perceptibly curtailed as the week went by.

What cared he for courses, his head running on Matilda? He wanted nothing of Endhill, nothing but bare house-room—and not even that, would Lord Overton only have been a little less obtuse. Had he had his will, he would have been at one place, one all-engrossing place, from morning till night; and indeed, so confident was he that it only needed a few decisive strokes to carry the day, that he could scarcely understand how it came about that no chance of giving these seemed forthcoming. He thought the Overton brothers needed a jog on the elbow; and accordingly one afternoon, when matters were thus at a stand-still, he made his way over early, but not too early—not early enough to be put off with luncheon by the innocent Teddy, nor

to place in an awkward predicament his sister. By arriving shortly after four on an ungenial day, he could spin out the time till a hope that he would stop dinner should drop out naturally; then a messenger could fetch his portmanteau in a trice, and all would be happily arranged. If Lord Overton or any one else should suggest, "Take a bed here," very well; there would be no need for saying "No." He had been prepared for anything, would agree to everything, and confidently hoped the best.

But the visit went on, and there was no word about sending for the portmanteau, and at length he was fain to jump up, watch in hand, and be amazed at the lateness of the hour, and vow he must fly like the wind to be in time for Mrs Hanwell's very, unfortunately, primitive dinner-hour. He declared he had forgotten dinner altogether. Did Lady Matilda think he could possibly walk over in three-quarters of an hour, and would her daughter be terribly severe were he a little

late? He was really terrified, he would not stop a single second longer.

"I'll see you back in my T-cart," announced Teddy, with a very fair show of obligingness, considering that he was inwardly raging against his sovereign lady, who had bound him over to do so sorely against his will, and, as he had told her, against his conscience also, "For you know the lies I shall have to tell if I do," he had said; and it's too bad of you to make me tell lies when there's no need for them." But she had been inexorable: he was to drive Mr Whewell back, and it was all nonsense about the lies; he was simply to *do* it—there was no lie in that; whether he liked doing it or not, was his own affair.

The argument had not closed when Whewell himself had appeared on the scene, and he now interposed eagerly, for he thought he saw daylight somewhere: "No, really; I could not think of your troubling yourself."

"Oh, no trouble; I should enjoy it of all things," said Teddy, with a look of dreadful

exultation at his sister. "There is nothing I like more than a drive in the wet." Another look. "And hark to the rain now! It's pouring cats and dogs!"

Here Whewell stole a glance at Matilda also. "Oh, if you *like* it," he responded dolefully; "there is no accounting for tastes. But I confess I am not a fish or a duck. However, it is my own fault for not being off sooner. I——"

"No hurry. I'll tool you over in twenty minutes or so. The T-cart, Charles," to the footman. "Tell them to look sharp. I let them know it would be wanted some little time ago." Then, in answer to a warning expression on his sister's brow, "I should have gone out anyway, Whewell," he concluded, thus in his own mind serving Matilda right. She had now made him tell three lies, if not four, and he had thus shown her that he was the one who knew best, and that the thing could not have been done without.

But even with the ordering of the T-cart, and the bustle of getting ready for it, had come no opening to Whewell for a quiet word with his hostess. Teddy had not been allowed to leave the room even to put on his coat and get his gloves and hat, without showing the visitor out first; and even in pressing the lady's hand as his adieux were being made, he had been unable to convey any sentiments, since she had chosen the moment, the very moment, when his fingers touched hers, to give directions about posting a letter. Her "Good-bye" to him, and her "Don't forget" to her brother, had been spoken in a breath.

Then Friday's attempt had been still more of a failure. Lady Matilda had not only been out, but had remained out, and he had not seen her at all; and although he could not, of course, be sure that it had been done on purpose to avoid him, and though he had refused to feel hurt and annoyed, or to take the matter as having any serious aspect, yet

he had been unable to forget that he had distinctly promised he would himself bring over from Endhill some expected documents for Challoner, and had named the time at which he would appear. On Friday night he had begun to think that he should not have quite so easy a path to tread as he had at first anticipated.

Lady Matilda, on her part, hoped that she had shown the man his place.

She had desired to do it gently. She still liked Whewell, and liked to be liked by him ; and would he now go, would he only vanish from the scene while there was still peace and goodwill between them, and while no words had passed which could cause regret or unpleasantness in the future, he should be at once reinstated in her good graces, and all presumption should be condoned and forgotten. Oh, if he would only go ; if anything she could say or do would make him understand ; if Robert would but exert himself to shake off his friend ; if Overton, of his own

accord and without being prompted, would but withhold the shooting! Oh, if they would but see, tiresome ignorant stupids that they were! They had not an eye among them.

All this she said to herself twenty times a-day, and she had no one else to say it to. No one helped her, no one comforted her; and accordingly it was with a somewhat sombre brow, and a little droop at the corners of her mouth, that Lady Matilda sat in her little room, deserted even by her faithful Teddy, ruefully wondering what was to happen next—whether she must actually quarrel with Whewell,—and, to pry still more closely into the secrets of her foolish heart, it must be owned that there lurked down in its depths all a woman's unquenchable desire to stand well with a lover to the last,—whether she must throw him off in the end, and say, “Mr Whewell,” in the most awe-administering tones she could muster, or whether——

The door opened, and she started to her feet, with difficulty suppressing a cry.

It was only Challoner, and the parted lips melted into a smile.

Only Challoner ! And who and what was he ? It mattered little what he was : he was not Whewell, and that was enough.

The relief was such, that the warmest of welcomes was scarcely warm enough to the speaker's mind. She could almost have kissed the rough hand she held, in gratitude for its owner's being merely himself and no one else. With him, all at once, she felt she had no fault to find : he stood before her in his integrity, and nothing could be laid to his charge ; no languishing gleam from his eye had ever had to be avoided—no forward, too forward movement to be repressed ; with him she was safe—on him she could still dare to shine. It was a dangerous rebound.

And undoubtedly it caused surprise in the minds of the ignorant pair. Teddy, indeed, had had his own ideas as to the reception his friend was likely to meet with, and he had looked deprecatingly into Matilda's face, and

had hidden behind Challoner's broad back as the door opened ; while Challoner himself, if the truth were told, hung his head like a child, and slouched like a criminal. By common consent both had stolen along the passage without opening their lips, and they had striven to turn the door-handle noiselessly and advanced inoffensively, and then—what was this ? Instead of being met by majesty in arms, an angel beamed forgiveness !

It was not an angel that whispered in Jem Challoner's ear at that moment.

CHAPTER XIV.

TEMPTED BY OPPORTUNITY.

“Opportunity creates a sinner : at least it calls him into action, and, like the warming sun, invites the sleeping serpent from his hole.”—OWEN FELTHAM.

WE left Teddy Lessingham and his sick friend on the threshold of Lady Matilda’s own snug little sitting-room, the recipients of a warm and unexpected welcome.

The two great big unmannerly fellows stood agape at the extent of their good fortune, and it was Matilda herself who pushed round the arm-chair for Mr Challoner to sit in ; it was her hands which piled up the wood-fire, and placed a screen in front of the invalid ; while at the same time questions, condolences, and congratulations fell musically upon his ear.

Teddy's spirits rose on the instant. "This is jolly," he said; "I do hope we shall have no one else come in; Robert or anybody; I expect it is too bad for other people. Hitchin was right about your not going down-stairs, Challoner—it is much pleasanter here; even when it rains there is always something to look at from this window; and I don't know how it is, but I do like small rooms better than large ones. Now, Challoner, don't you?"

"An unfair question." It was his sister who answered. "A shabby, impertinent, home-thrusting question, and not to be repeated. Mr Challoner being in my room, and in my *small* room, shall not be called upon to prefer it to any other. I will not have him so ill treated. He has been wounded in our service,—oh yes, that was certainly the case,—wounded, and is now in hospital, or, as seamen say, in dock for repairs. He is to be repaired under careful supervision; he is to be tenderly dealt with; Teddy shall not——"

“I’m as good to him as ever I can be!” cried Teddy, staring.

The next point was, did Mr Challoner feel quite warm? Did he feel any draught?

He felt no draught, he felt a delicious sense of luxury in mind and body, he felt that he was yielding to a spell which had already begun to work, and against which he could no longer struggle; and he felt that, come what might, for good or for evil, he would not now be anywhere else for the world.

He might be a fool? He would be a fool, then. He might be worse? Worse, then: so be it.

He had not of his own accord come to this enchanted spot, and stepped within the magic circle, but he had been brought thither against his will, by a fate which, so he told himself, had been too powerful for him,—so now he would have it out with fate, and see which was the winner in the game; he would not again try to escape, but he himself would dare himself, and dare the worst himself could do.

Throughout the past week he had been casting about in his mind how to evade this moment. He had never meant to see Matilda again, should he once turn his back on the grim walls of Overton Hall; he had seen once, and it had been enough; ever since the night on which she had knelt by his side, clasping her hands upon his arm, with her lovely, weary, patient face turned from him, and her ringing voice silent to him, and no smiles for him, and no eyes for him, he had never had her image far from his fancy. He told himself that he had escaped by the skin of his teeth. That had he been in Whewell's place—the favoured Whewell's place—he had fallen a victim far, far more mortally wounded than Whewell had been. Whewell? Pah! How could he, or such as he, appreciate a Matilda?

And Matilda's fair form night and day, sometimes beautiful and gracious, sometimes frowning and scornful, but mingled ever with that of another, had run through and through, and twisted subtly in and out of every feverish

vision—Matilda, always Matilda,—and always Matilda beheld with love, distress, and shame.

If he had only gone while those feelings prevailed ! If only that miserable doctor had not been suffered to interfere and bar the door with his preposterous dictums ! Tempting a man who was doing what he could to escape from temptation ; drawing back a man into the flames who was flying from fire !

Well, it was all over now ; it was at an end now ; it was of no use looking back and lamenting over what might have been. He would stand aloof no longer ; the gods were against it : here he was, fast bound, losing not a note of the soft voice, a fall of the dark eyelash, a turn of the graceful head ; here he was, drinking in with every sense the draught that should have been to him a deadly poison, breathing the fumes of the intoxicating cup, bending over it, clasping it in his arms,—here he was, and here he would remain ; he had thrown up the contest for the nonce, overpowered.

And this was the unobserving, indiscriminating, passive, stony Challoner : this the discreet friend ; the uninteresting and uninterested man ; the over-modest stranger, who now stood in such excellent contrast to the over-bold one. No, my lady, you are the very least bit out in your calculations this time. Talk away ; it is all very nice and simple, isn't it ? Mr Whewell may come now if he chooses, may he not ? Whewell is the person to be thought about ; Whewell has to be cold-shouldered unfortunately ; and Whewell should have known better, and he is a troublesome fellow, and must be got rid of : but poor Mr Challoner, who is so good and so cold, and who has been so very, very badly used, he shall see now that Matilda can own herself in the wrong, and is not ashamed to show it.

And she does show it, and she has never shown to greater advantage in her life.

"If only those *Endhills* will stop away now," inwardly comments Teddy, observant and delighted. "If only this hurricane will

keep up and blow them all in at their own door, should they ever attempt to come out of it! Challoner gets on first-rate with Matilda to-day; how they are talking! That chap can talk, I see, when he chooses. We shall have them quite good friends directly, and then he can stay on as long as he likes."

Meantime his sister's thoughts ran thus: "Well, now I see the man, he is not at all disagreeably ugly. His eyes are grey and soft; I rather like them; they do not look very clever or penetrating—but then we cannot all be clever and penetrating. They look nice good quiet eyes,—not suggestive, perhaps, not capable of a vast amount of damage, but very well in their way; quite up to the rest of the face, in fact."

The rest of the face was nothing much to boast of: skin, dark-red and sunburnt; nose, hard and a little crooked; mouth, large, steady, and slightly drawn down at the corners; the mild and pensive expression of the whole just dashed by a certain squareness and ruggedness

of the chin, which seemed out of harmony if one had time to think about it, but which was usually overlooked by the people who characterised Mr Challoner as a quiet-looking man.

He had neither moustache, beard, nor whiskers, although his hair, which was of no particular shade of dusky colour, grew so closely round the temples that it suggested these would have been easily forthcoming, and would have been good of their kind. The head was well shapen, and well set on a pair of magnificent shoulders.

All of this was for the first time manifest to Lady Matilda. Until now she had seen Challoner without seeing him ; she had been conscious of a lay figure somewhere behind other people, of a dim outline tall enough and broad enough to block up half the window at Endhill, and of a somewhat coarse, and, as she had then fancied it, stolid visage, now and then coming into the focus when she had looked at random up and down the

table on the occasion of her last dinner-party. Afterwards she had contemplated the face with a shudder, when her own excited imagination had run riot over the accident, and that had been all ; to the real Challoner not a moment's attention had been given.

Now, however, he was to be treated differently. "See," said the hostess, pointing to a piece of needlework on an antique screen in front of her,—“see, Mr Challoner, I must tell you the story of this. This is a fine piece of old tapestry, worked, it is said, by one of my very greatest of great-grandmothers. Good lady, she must have had little time for anything else, if all the work in this house wherewith she is accredited, really and truly was done by her. Now, look at this piece. These are Moors : here sits the Moorish king among his beauties ; that one is the favourite, or has been the favourite so far, but you see he now turns from her and bestows his royal attention elsewhere, on this damsel with the musical instrument in her

hand, which he is pointing to as he presses her to play and sing. She is willing enough, I should say, smiling and nodding her consent; but the other, the neglected fair one, is very much put out indeed, and a fit of the sulks is to my mind inevitable. What do you think? Am I right? Is his Moorish majesty to have a bad time of it; or will the lady pocket her affront, and be content to play when she is asked in her turn, but to play—second fiddle?”

“An awkward position certainly, Lady Matilda.” Challoner looked calmly in the speaker's face. “A bad business. The king should—should have managed better.”

“Oh, poor man, that is being too severe!” ‘How happy could he be with either!’ you know; but that is what a man never does know, and never will learn. A woman is different; she is less exorbitant, less exacting. One lover, that is to say, one whole lover, one lover all to herself, suffices her. Of course she does not like to share him—witness this

scene," nodding to the picture; "but then that is only fair. Who would have an eye or an ear of a man with two eyes and two ears?"

"You think she should have all or nothing."

"Precisely; all or nothing."

"Yet, Lady Matilda, half a loaf is better than no bread."

"Better, indeed! What a base idea, Mr Challoner! Half such a loaf as that too," indicating the luckless Moor. "No, indeed; the fair one is not so simple as to content herself with a paltry share, and no more would any true woman."

"*You* would not, I bet," said Teddy, finding at last something to understand in all this. "I pity the poor beggar who tries it on with you."

"We are not talking of me, dear; we are talking about pictures, or rather about this trumpery imitation of one," yawned his sister, pushing back the screen. "There, Moor, re-

tire to oblivion." But Teddy had been cogitating as she spoke.

"It's all very fine for Matilda to talk," observed he now to Challoner; "she pretends to be down on other women, but she wouldn't like it herself. She can't stand anybody interfering with her——"

——"My dear boy, take your elbows out of my lap," impatiently.

"And if a fellow made up to her and to any one else at the same time," proceeded Teddy, doggedly bent on a hearing——

——"Nonsense!" cried Matilda, with a frown.

"Oh, it's very well to say 'nonsense,' but the very devil's in you,—oh, I say, you are not going?"

She was, with tears in her eyes; but they brought her back, and placed her again between them, and Teddy knelt at her feet, and Challoner begged for forgiveness as though he too had offended, and the ruffled brow

smoothed again, and the burning cheek cooled as the afternoon wore on, and seemed only to wear too fast away. But it was curious that the trifling episode was destined never altogether to pass from the minds of two of those present.

CHAPTER XV.

HOPING STILL.

“There are none so blind as those that will not see.”

WIND and rain could not continue for ever, so that although there was no abatement of the blast which still howled and moaned among the ocean cliffs, and whistled over the bare unprotected downs above, there was on the following day a decided cessation of the torrents which had hitherto poured down as it had seemed from exhaustless fountains.

Towards afternoon, indeed, the clouds ceased to empty themselves at all, and scurried harmlessly across the sky, leaving here and there openings through which gleams of pale sunlight stole; and thus it came to pass that,

after repeated tappings of the barometer, and investigations from the front door, Mr Frank Whewell at length found himself in a position to point out that there was nothing to prevent any one—any one, at least, with thick boots and a greatcoat—from indulging in a good walk. A good walk would do them both good—the “both” referring to his friend Hanwell and himself, and the “good walk” being of course to Overton Hall.

As the weather had really improved, and as nothing could be brought forward on the other hand, host and hostess were graciously pleased to approve the proposal—Robert not unwilling himself to escape from four walls and Sunday magazines, and Lotta to hear what was going on at the other house.

Moreover, she affirmed that as nothing had been heard of Mr Challoner for a whole day, and as he was still *their* guest, though detained by misfortune elsewhere, it would be only right to look after his welfare. To have gone the day before, that frightful day, would have

been foolish,—it would have been more, an unnecessary attention, since Mr Whewell had called at Overton on the Friday, and had sat an hour in Mr Challoner's room; but as no one had gone yesterday, and as no messenger had come over from the Hall either, she must own she thought it a good arrangement for the two gentlemen to walk thither now, inquire after the invalid, and find out when he would be able to return to Endhill. Return to Endhill he certainly must, to complete his visit.

Mr Whewell joyfully undertook to satisfy her, both as friend and hostess. He had been in his own mind bitterly indignant with Lotta all the evening before, considering that to her more than to Robert he owed it that he had been prevented going to Lord Overton's as usual: Lotta had stood out against all his representations and entreaties, had assured him she had no anxiety for tidings, and no desire to send messages; and he had not been able even to make her see that her mother and uncles would expect him.

She had been sure that they would not expect him, and had, indeed, told her husband apart that what would be said would be this, that they were unable to amuse their own guest for a single day, and that he had been driven to Overton from sheer dearth of entertainment at home. This had touched Robert's weakest part, and he too had strenuously set himself against the going, so that a dull and sullen evening had been spent, and an equally uncongenial morning had followed, until the first lucky break in the clouds had induced the resolute barrister to make his proposition afresh. It had been met amiably, and he was at once restored to good-humour.

He was now anxious to wipe out of everybody's recollection the fact that he had previously been annoyed and had shown his annoyance ; and so well did he succeed, and so entirely was peace restored, that Mrs Hanwell sent her love twice over, and begged Mr Whewell to remember to tell her mother that she would *not* be at home on Wednesday, and *would* be

at home on Thursday, should Lady Matilda say anything about coming over.

All smooth behind : now forward ; now for Overton.

“And what did you do with yourselves yesterday ? How did you pass the time yesterday ?” he began with animation, the first greetings past. “We had a miserable day of it,” aside to Lady Matilda. “You pitied us, I hope ? Our only consolation was, that you were pitying us, as we were you ; we were in sympathy, at all events. But how wretched it was ! Hanwell and I had had enough of each other hours before dinner-time ; and I am sure Mrs Hanwell wished us both anywhere else. Had it rested with me,” lower still, “had it been left to me, I need hardly say where I should have been.”

“Back in London, of course,” rejoined she, easily ; “back in your dear Pall Mall and Piccadilly. No one blames you,” as he looked denial ; “no one expects anything else. London people can scarcely be supposed to enter

into the delights of a really wet day in the country ; I do not mean a half-and-half wet day, when it rains and clears and rains again, but a perfectly hopeless, eventless, dead-and-buried wet day, without the chance of a visitor, or the sound of the door-bell——”

“I know—I know. But,” said Whewell, delighted, “your door-bell would have rung once at least yesterday, if I had had my will. I protested as much as I could ; I did indeed. And could I have,—I mean, would Mr and Mrs Hanwell have allowed it, I should have been in the body where I already was in the spirit—here.”

“Here ? Oh no. We never”—Lady Matilda opened her eyes, and drew herself up ever so slightly—“never expected any of you. Had you come here, you would have wished yourself back again, I assure you. You like lively doings, and there was nothing going on here—nothing amusing to bring you. We did not even go into the billiard-room ; we just sat round the fire and talked.”

“And yawned in each other's faces.”

“Yawned? Well, no; I do not think we did yawn; I have no recollection of yawning.”

“You were not so ill-mannered: you only wished you could have taken the liberty, instead of taking it; you said as we did, ‘When, oh, when, will it be—dinner-time?’”

“I doubt if we made the remark,” said Matilda, drily.

“Challoner is all right again, I see,” continued her companion, after a momentary pause. “Is this—I presume this is his first appearance down-stairs?”

“Down-stairs; yes. He sat in the boudoir yesterday; the doctor thought he ought not to go down-stairs, the day was so bad.”

“For fear of a chill, you know. In a large house like this there are so many passages,” responded Whewell, conversant with everything; “where you have so many passages there must be draughts, and, of course, about dinner-time all the spring-doors would be

open. I—ah—I suppose Challoner only got up at dinner-time?”

“Oh no; he was up in his room all day, I believe, and he came into the boudoir about four.”

“And you were all there till eight?”

“We were; we were all there till eight. And after eight, too; we returned there for the evening.”

“Oh!”

“Even Overton made one of the party. You may imagine how we were flattered; at least *you* may not imagine, as you don't know Overton, but to any one else that would tell its own tale.”

“Of Lord Overton's boredom?”

“Oh dear, no; of our agreeability. Overton never is bored—I mean by his own company; and therein lay the compliment. He sought us out, actually sought us out, of his own choice and for his own benefit.”

“You were a merry party then, it seems?”

He was not to be disconcerted.

“ Very. We usually are.”

“ It was not Mr Challoner’s doing then ?”

Whether she heard or not he could not be sure ; she was appealed to at the moment, and responded to the appeal, and let Mr Whewell’s playfulness pass ; and after all, it did not signify, he considered, since whatever cause he might have to feel chagrined at the cheery aspect which Lady Matilda persisted in giving to reminiscences in which he had had no share, it would have been absurd to be jealous of Challoner. She might choose to torment him, but she would never take any notice of Challoner ; and as being tormented was many degrees better than being let alone, he presently plucked up spirit to try again.

“ We are not in the little room to-day,” he said.

“ We are too large a number to-day,” replied the lady.

“ Might we not make an adjournment ? Some of us, at least ?”

“And for that, we are again too small a number.”

“It is unfortunate. We are only two more than yesterday.”

“Two too many.” But Lady Matilda smiled, and it was impossible to tell how much was meant.

“You are—are terribly exact, I perceive,” rejoined Whewell, trying to laugh; “are you always so? Would one more, for instance, have been too many yesterday?”

“Well, you could have had no chair, you know.”

“I should have been *de trop*, evidently.”

“You could have been accommodated with a footstool.”

“At your feet?”

Again she had to affect not to hear; she was determined not to quarrel with the man. He was going on the morrow—she had heard Robert say he was going on the morrow—and to hold on only a little longer would not be hard.

“Well, no,” said Matilda, pleasantly; “I think, after all, I should have yielded you my chair. I think that if there had been four gentlemen *I* should have been the person *de trop*; I should have had to make my exit, and leave you and the other three in possession of the field. You must own, Mr Whewell, that four to one is too many, altogether too many; as it was——”

“Your party was complete?” He was scanning her keenly.

No, she would not go as far as that. “The room was full, quite another thing,” said Matilda; “but happily there are more rooms than one in the house, and no one need pretend that he was not wanted,” with a charming smile, “because he was lazy and preferred staying indoors to a tiresome disagreeable wet walk.”

“Indeed, indeed,” began Whewell, earnestly.

“Oh dear me, there is nothing to ‘indeed’ about. Why, Mr Whewell, cannot you see

that I was jesting? Pray do not look so serious; you appal me."

He began to feel appalled himself. "I am sorry to offend you, Lady Matilda."

"I grant you my pardon, Mr Whewell." With her finest mock curtesy she laughed in his face, and he thought he had never seen any one more incomprehensible. "Come," continued she, throwing off the look the next instant—"come, let us understand each other. My son-in-law has, I perceive, been infecting you with some of his notions as to the exactions of propriety. He and you have already been beyond praise in the way you have done your duty by your sick friend—Robert's sick friend, I mean—and still your consciences are not satisfied, because you failed to come over in a deluge yesterday, when no sensible person would ever have thought of setting foot outside; when none of us did" (she had forgotten Teddy, but perhaps Teddy could hardly be reckoned a sensible person), "and when we should not

have thought very highly of—to be precisely truthful—of you or Robert if you had. In short, nothing would have amazed us more than to see you walk in,” added she, happily oblivious at the moment of another fact—namely, that she had listened throughout most of the afternoon, and through a part of it in what was almost an agony of apprehension, for his approaching step, and that she had only dared to give him up when darkness had fairly set in.

At last she felt that she had disposed of the question, and had done so without abating a hair's-breadth of her dignity and sweetness, and without, she hoped, giving more pain than was absolutely necessary. That she had given some was a matter of course—he had forced it from her; and his now saying nothing further showed that he was suffering.

“Are they to be asked to stay dinner?” presently whispered Teddy in her ear. “Eh? I can't hear. Are they?”

“As Overton likes,” replied his sister, indifferently.

“Are they, or are they not? What do you mean? Who is to know what Overton likes?”

“Let him ask them.”

“Him? Overton?”

“Yes.”

“Am I to tell him to ask them?”

“Oh dear, Teddy, yes; I tell you, yes. I think he had better. I think it would be better. Go you and tell him. But pray do not show that you come straight from me; it will make it seem at once as if it were all my doing, which is just what I do not want it to be,” cried poor Matilda, under her breath. “Mr Whewell is looking at us now.”

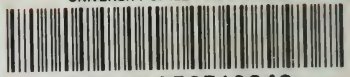
And Mr Whewell was; and it was all as plain as day to him—or he thought it was—when, a very few minutes afterwards, he noted Lord Overton drawn aside in Teddy’s most diplomatic fashion, and charged with

an invitation which was fired off on the instant. His depressed spirits rose on elastic springs once more, and all Matilda's work had to be done over again.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.



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